



## A vehicle for positive acculturation: A parent support sharing group in Hong Kong

By  
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### Abstract

Cultural diversity in Hong Kong has increased dramatically following a series of reforms in population and immigration policies after the unification of Hong Kong in 1997. Since then, intergroup conflict between Hong Kong locals and mainland Chinese people have become one of the major social issues in Hong Kong. Homogenizing and overlooking intergroup clashes contribute to misunderstandings toward different cultures and resolving these clashes through social policies and services. Cultural research indicates that stereotyped beliefs are transmitted intergenerationally. Policy responses seek to nurture a harmonized society where perceived differences are respected and understood, rather than merely acknowledged. This study adopts narrative inquiry to examine the dynamics of acculturation, social identity, and intergroup contact among local and migrant parents and to explore the mechanisms for promoting positive acculturation amid diversity. We observed four parents from mainland China and three local Hong Kong parents with children aged 4–13 who attended two discussion sessions about parenting. The findings revealed that promoting positive acculturation via parent sharing support group is effective in promoting psychological adaptation at the individual level and reducing intergroup stereotypes at a cultural level. Conducive conditions that facilitate positive acculturation and professional group work practices are also discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** Intergroup contact, facilitating acculturation, self-identity, group dynamics, cultural sensitivity, social harmony

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## Introduction

Assimilation is commonly considered as the final goal of cultural acculturation. With the goal of altering, at the least, the behaviors of immigrants to bring them more in line with the host culture, assimilation homogenizes cultural diversity and operates under the assumption that homogenization will result in social harmony (Angelini et al 2015). The challenges of assimilation for immigrants who transit from their own culture to another distinctive culture have been widely researched (Tajfel 2010). However, the challenges of assimilation and transcultural differences experienced by sub-cultural groups in the same country with shared cultural origin to a certain extent have rarely been investigated.

Hong Kong was a British colony for more than a century. In 1997, the reunification of mainland China and Hong Kong united not only these regions but also the people, who were separated for decades, nurtured by different systems of governance, and who experienced different sociopolitical realities. Since the unification in 1997, the number of immigrants from mainland China has increased tremendously, diversifying the population. Many assume that, as cultural groups with shared roots, mainland Chinese and Hong Kongers live together cordially. However, the reality is often very different (Hui et al 2012). The perceived identity of Hong Kongers has been widely researched, both before and after the reunification. One of the most critical findings of such research is that “Hong Kong Chinese” regard themselves as different from mainland Chinese due to having a different worldview, being more connected to the rest of the world (Lai 2011). Migration from mainland China to Hong Kong has led to maladaptation and social isolation for the new arrivals. Education and cultural studies research indicate that new arrivals from mainland China have been forced to “adapt” to Hong Kong’s cultural norms and that they feel isolated from the mainstream culture (Wang & Chang 2010).

The new arrivals to Hong Kong tend to import values and behaviors from their hometowns, without adjusting them to fit the local context (Jackson 2002). Thus, many Hong Kong locals, unable to understand the values and behaviors of mainland Chinese, tend to describe the new arrivals as “less civilized,” while the latter often describe the former as discriminatory (Lai 2011, Yip 2015). Owing to this lack of trust and understanding between Hong Kong locals and new arrivals, the latter tend to congregate and form their own communities without connecting to the host culture or entering the mainstream, which further aggravates social segregation (Wang & Chang 2010). In the past three years, the social unrest resulted by Hong Kong locals’ mistrust in governments of both lands and the difficulties at social level brought by COVID-19 pandemic affect many aspects of living in every single individual in Hong Kong regardless of which district one resides. The frustration and difficulties encountered by Hong Kong locals

intensified the existing social segregation with more extreme stereotyped beliefs towards mainland Chinese (Hou et al 2021).

Previous research indicates that many stereotypes are embedded and reflected in parenting practices (Barni & Ranieri 2012, Hogg 2012, Shek & Lee 2005). Based on such findings, parenting practices could be an appropriate medium for instilling unbiased cultural and social values from generation to generation (Wang & Chang 2010). This study involved the observation of parent support groups, with the aim of exploring which mechanisms might promote positive acculturation, especially positive acculturation that recognizes and understands cultural diversity and does not demand that immigrants abandon their identity or cultural roots. Although the research context is the cultural and social politics of both Hong Kong and mainland China, the mechanisms that promote mutual respect and understanding at an individual level are analyzed from the perspectives of acculturation, social identity, and the intergroup contact hypotheses, which have a global application.

## **Theoretical Background**

### *Adaptation and acculturation*

Immigration is not merely a geographical relocation of people, but a complex cultural transition that involves significant changes to the social, psychological, cultural, and physical environment of a child (Aksel et al 2007). Adaptation is traditionally interpreted as a positive phenomenon. It is a process wherein an individual engages oneself in relatively stable changes that take place in themselves or a group in response to external demands (Blau 2015). However, these changes may not always be satisfying to the individual. The adaptation process is multifaceted. Individuals may become better adapted to their environment (i.e., adjustment by way of assimilation) or may resist or leave the environment altogether (i.e., adjustment by separation). The “fit” of an individual to its environment may help the individual to manage daily life in a new cultural context on the social level. Unfortunately, such adjustments may not necessarily be positive on the psychological level (Ward 1996).

Acculturation is a process that denotes mutual adaptation and continuous contact, leading to changes in either the immigrant or local group or both. It is a process wherein groups of individuals from different cultures come into continuous, direct intercultural contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either the dominant or non-dominant group or both (Ali 2008). Successful acculturation involves positive affective responses, including high self-esteem, a sense of belonging, a positive life prospect, and feelings of joy, satisfaction, and gratification (Fang et al 2016). However, unsatisfying

acculturation experiences involve being excluded and marginalized, which can lead to low self-esteem and feelings of uncertainty and fear (Liu et al 2009). People tend to devalue their cultural background and the values of their family in order to assimilate to the dominant culture. Such devaluation can be particularly vigorous in school-age children whose needs for acceptance and relationships with their peers are particularly strong since children spend most of their time in a social setting with these peers (Sonderegger et al 2004). Cultural research on intergenerational value transmission indicates that cultural values, a sense of belonging, life prospects within one's own culture, and interpretations of other cultures tend to transmit from one generation to the next and that they may act as a barrier to the successful cultural adaptation of the next generation (Dewilde & Skrefsrud 2016).

Individuals are placed on a continuum of acculturation processes, depending on their personality, difficulties with adjustment, the context of their involvement, and their social support. At times, these processes (such as ways of speaking, dressing, and eating) develop rather quickly, but they can also create cultural conflict and acculturative stress (such as in adopting another culture's values) that manifest, during intercultural interactions, in the denial of one's ethnic origins, uncertainty, anxiety, and depression (Berry 1980). Individuals can either resist the new culture and values (separation) or obscure their own culture and values and adopt those of the new culture (assimilation). The ideal model, however, is for individuals to maintain their culture and values while positively adapting to the new culture (integration) (Berry 1980). Assimilation has long been mistakenly considered the ultimate goal of adaptation and it is interchangeably used with integration. However, it is important to distinguish an individual who is undergoing assimilation from one who is undergoing integration (Yu et al 2014).

According to Berry (1980), people develop different acculturation strategies. These strategies consist of two distinct but related components: attitudes (an individual's preference for a particular acculturation strategy) and behaviors (the actions taken by a person to acculturate) that are exhibited in typical intercultural encounters. There are individual differences in the acculturation strategies that people adopt to achieve satisfactory adaptations. That is, there is no general acculturation strategy that fits everyone or even people from the same cultural group sharing the same acculturative context. Individuals participate in the new culture to varying degrees and have a variety of goals to achieve in any contact situation (Yoon et al 2010). Two frequent conflicts encountered by acculturating individuals are (1) maintaining one's heritage, culture, and identity, and (2) coming to more closely resemble the dominant group. Although individual members of a group may choose an acculturation strategy, they may not always have the freedom to implement the strategy of their choosing. When the dominant group

or culture constrains the choices of the non-dominant group, individuals in that group can only adopt attitudes and behavior that resemble the dominant group to meet that group's cultural expectations. Thus, mutual acculturation can only occur when the dominant group or culture is open to cultural diversity. The ideal form of acculturation is respectful cultural integration, which accepts and, more importantly, understands that some degrees of cultural integrity can be maintained along with participation in a broader social network. Under the prevalent influence of globalization and contemporary cultural studies, assimilation should no longer be considered the goal of acculturation. Instead, the optimal goal is a multidimensional view of cultural adaptation that emphasizes cultural integrity and the formation of a new cultural identity that encourages respect and a sense of belonging during intercultural contact.

### *Acculturative stress*

Research on international acculturation indicates that families and their children who maintain contact with their culture of origin, while also actively adapting to the host culture, are most likely to achieve a positive outcome in their adjustment to the host society (Dewilde & Skrefsrud 2016). People who are more adaptive and positive about acknowledging the differences and similarities between their host and home cultures are more likely to acquire the cultural or contextual knowledge and social cues that facilitate a positive acculturation process. Failure to acquire such knowledge may lead to resistance to adaptation and expose a person to acculturative stress (Chen 2014, Yuan et al 2013). Acculturative stress degrades self-esteem, impedes sense of hope for a new life, contributes to depressive symptoms and poor mental health. These effects cannot be alleviated without developing cultural integrity and facilitating positive acculturation. Studies revealed that social support from home and host culture are both needed to facilitate the process of cultural adaptation and adjustment (Fang et al 2020, Chen 2014). These social supports include quality integrative socialization and people's open attitude to diversities. Positive acculturation can only be possible when the mainstream cultural group is open to a multicultural orientation, in which diversity is acknowledged as part of the mainstream culture and as part of the possibility of forming a new cultural identity (Zheng et al 2004).

### *Facilitating acculturation in communities*

Studies on acculturation suggested both integration strategy and open for multiculturalism are needed in facilitating acculturation (Anghel & Lupu 2014). Under the process of acculturation, it is not uncommon for minorities to adopt

the cultural typographies such as appearances without understanding the deeper meanings behind these typographies (Engen 2003). For example, an immigrant can understand the literal meaning of a story without understanding the true cultural meaning embedded in the story. Integration strategy refers to behaviours and attitudes to get involved in both mainstream and minority groups (Streit et al 2021). Immigrants with integrative socialization skills actively participate in both cultures which results in more intergroup contact. However, more contact does not guarantee quality contact. Being involved in a society that is open for multiculturalism, people are more likely to engage in quality intergroup contact in which people tend to understand instead of tolerate differences, interpret diversity as the norm and an asset rather than as a burden to society (Brown & Hewstone 2005). With deeper understanding of differences in quality intergroup contact, people of minority group feel less excluded and discriminated against whereas people of mainstream culture reveal more between group similarities than differences (Angelini, Casi & Corazzini 2015). The lower perceived discrimination and higher perceived similarity in both groups are the fundamental conditions that facilitate the immigrants to actively engage in quality integrative socialization with the mainstreamers which lead to successful acculturation.

### *Acculturation and social harmony*

The benefits of positive acculturation and the effects of intergeneration transmission of cultural values have been strongly supported by various international acculturation studies. School is one of the communities in which families with young children from diverse backgrounds gather and interact on a regular basis. It is not uncommon for children from non-dominant families to separate themselves from children in the dominant culture and to form their own groups (Dewilde & Skrefsrud 2016). These children are participating in a less-than-ideal adaptation process that damages their self-esteem, devalues their cultural heritage, and isolates them, resulting in unsatisfactory social support. Therefore, it is crucial to facilitate positive acculturation in families with young children to promote the self-esteem and cultural integrity are needed to preserve the values of one's culture of origin and to facilitate integrative socialization to develop a sense of belonging to the dominant culture in the younger generation (Yu et al 2016).

Integrative socialization is a social and adaptation process in which the individual is capable of shifting along a continuum or interplay of home and host cultural values without devaluing his or her own cultural heritage (Streit et al 2021). Given socialization is informed by cultural values, integrative socialization allows the individual to be guided by values, attitudes and behaviors that facilitate

awareness of the co-existent of different cultural values during the socialization process (Angehel & Lupu 2014). People with integrative socialization skills can therefore engage themselves in intergroup socialization functionally and social adaptively with a high degree of cultural sensitivity in the involved context. In the process of integrative socialization, the two groups must be provided with opportunities to engage in “quality” intergroup contact (i.e., productive interaction) that facilitates understanding and the acknowledgment of similarities and differences. Social identity theory and hypotheses of intergroup contact highlight mechanisms that promote mutual understanding among individuals and respect for cultural diversity.

### *Social identity theory and the intergroup contact hypothesis*

Social identity theory (SIT) suggests that “in-group” and “out-group” member identification is established through a process of comparison among group members (Tajfel 2010). In other words, identity is formed by actions of social comparison within groups (Jarvis 2012). Perceived similarities facilitate in-group member formation, whereas perceived differences facilitate out-group member formation. Being in-group or out-group is a looping process of member grouping and regrouping that is based on perceived similarities and differences.

SIT regards acculturation as a process through which individuals experience an “identity shock.” This shock facilitates an individual to use his or her existing knowledge and resources actively to understand the impact of both difference and similarity. The theory provides a theoretical grounding for the consciously reflective process through which people not only explore perceived similarities and differences on a deeper level but also expand existing knowledge to explore the shared ground and accommodate differences for the sake of cultural integration.

On the other hand, the intergroup contact hypothesis provides some practical suggestions for how one might pass through the process of cultural integration and preserve one’s values while accommodating those of the dominant culture. Contexts that facilitate quality contact between different cultural groups assist participants in developing respect and an understanding of multidimensional viewpoints (Pettigrew 1998). Grounded in principles of pluralism (i.e., no identity is static, and values and beliefs are fluid across time and contexts), the intergroup contact hypothesis assumes that people can be more open to diversity and capable of acknowledging, respecting, and valuing differences to the same extent as similarities. The hypothesis highlights that understanding is more important than tolerance. Mere toleration does not lead to an understanding of differences; a real understanding includes a variety of dimensions concerning individuals and their culture (Turner et al 2008). Stereotype formation of other cultural groups is,



therefore, a significant obstacle to engagement in quality intergroup contact for both dominant and non-dominant groups.

In this study, a parent support group with a mix of local and new arrivals from mainland China was observed to examine the dynamics of acculturation, social identity, and intergroup contact among local and migrant parents and to explore mechanisms for promoting positive acculturation amid diversity.

## Methods

Tin Shui Wai is a well-known suburban area of Hong Kong that has garnered negative media attention (HK01 2019) for its large population of migrants and people who have suffered financial difficulties, and for the family tragedies that sometimes occur there. One nonprofit organization, an NGO, in Tin Shui Wai organizes regular events for the neighborhood, which consists of both new arrivals and Hong Kong locals. The supervisor of this NGO, a social worker, scheduled two parenting discussion events in October and December in 2017 attended by parents from a variety of backgrounds.

Tin Shui Wai is a newly developing suburban district with more public housing and new arrivals from mainland China than any other district in Hong Kong. The NGO serves the residents and schools in the area, providing family and social support services. The staff at the NGO reports that new districts like Tin Shui Wai generally consist of younger families with young children. The parents may be either local Hong Kongers or come from mainland China. Since Tin Shui Wai is located far from a city center, it offers fewer employment opportunities and requires a greater commuting investment, both in terms of time and transportation costs. Many women in Tin Shui Wai are therefore housewives. By delivering parenting workshops to residents in nearby housing, the NGO hoped to both develop a relationship with the residents and benefit them as well.

The social worker in this study resides in Tin Shui Wai, works at the NGO, and is a mother of young children. She has been serving in Tin Shui Wai for over seven years, during which she has witnessed a shift in the population demographics and the resulting conflicts. She regularly runs a support sharing group to provide social support to people with shared concerns in the neighborhood, and to offer a platform that permits deeper mutual understanding for participants with difference cultural values and beliefs (Child 2004). Her role in this study was to recruit participants for the parent sharing sessions. She also served as the group facilitator with the aim of establishing contact with the parents and encouraging them to form a community-based self-help group whose members could support one another.

Seven parents were included in each of the discussion sessions: Four new



arrivals (who had immigrated to Hong Kong over seven years prior and whose children were born in Hong Kong) and three Hong Kong locals. They were all mothers, aged 31–39, with children attending kindergarten through high school. These parents were residents of the same government-subsidized public housing and had participated in other activities organized by the social worker. The participants were considered of lower socioeconomic status in their local context; they either relied on social welfare or had a household income below the median household income in Hong Kong.

Data were collected from two sharing sessions, scheduled one month apart due to the operational needs of the NGO. Conversation in the discussion groups was in Cantonese. The collected data were analyzed after being transcribed. The transcribed data and analyses were then presented to the participants for their verification and elaboration. All participants were informed about the aims of the study, and their consent to participate was obtained either verbally or in written and verbal form. Each session lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours.

Narrative inquiry was selected as the appropriate research methodology because it emphasizes meaning contextualization, data transparency and completeness, the subjectivity of truth, and fluidity (Webster & Mertova 2007). Narrative offers personal account of experiences within contexts wherein the embedded socio-cultural values of the context which the narrator involves can be revealed (Carless & Douglas 2017). The examination of complicated, ongoing sociocultural dynamics and the exploration of those cultural factors that might promote intergroup understanding required an intricate understanding of the discussion of participants' beliefs. In this study, the inquiry of narratives provides not only a holistic perspective of a particular life event at the particular moment, but also the development of intergroup contact and group dynamics over time through dialogical interaction among group members and the group facilitator (Clandinin 2013).

Given the aim of this study is to explore the mechanisms that facilitates intergroup contact and acculturation, narrative inquiry is the ideal methodology in unfolding the socio-cultural values and meanings in dialogical interaction in the account of the socio-cultural context of the study. Focus group was chosen as the method for data collection as the study involved a small group of participants in sharing their life experiences and stories. Data analysis is conducted based on the field texts, including stories, field notes, conversations, and life experience (Clandinin 2013, Carless & Douglas 2017). Data objectivity can be achieved through a high degree of data transparency regarding how data are collected and interpreted.

### **Narrative Analysis**

#### *First meeting: Getting acquaintance*

The theme of the parenting sharing series was “Folk Knowledge – Diversity in Culture and Parenting.” The theme was selected by the social worker who had learned that parents desperately sought out the “standard” and “best” parenting strategies from professionals. By focusing on cultural parenting practices, the social worker provided a platform for parents from different backgrounds to share their parenting practices in order to promote intergroup understanding and to learn from one another. The first of the two sharing sessions focused on sharing different views on cultural diversity and parenting practices.

Five minutes before the session was scheduled to start, the participants entered the room one by one and were greeted by the social worker (SW) who served as the host and facilitator. The SW arranged the chairs in a circle, and participants sat next to each other without interacting whilst waiting for the session to begin. The discussion began at 10:00 am. After the SW explained my presence and the study to the participants, the parents were invited to introduce themselves to the group. The SW began the discussion by asking whether the participants agreed that parenting was a cultural practice. They all nodded in agreement. The SW then inquired into their perception of “new arrivals,” “Hong Kong locals,” and the parenting styles of the two groups. Despite expectations that the new arrivals would show signs of discomfort, as the label “new arrivals” has a negative connotation, the participants were very open and honest in discussing their views. Mother A (new arrival) started by observing, with apparent frustration, “People always say that new arrivals are lazy, don’t work, and rely on welfare. Many of us are very hard-working and employed. I do admit there are some lazy ones, but many are not.”

Mother B (new arrival) claimed, “Yes, if jobs were available, nobody would rely on welfare. People always think we are lazy because the media only reports the bad parts.”

Mother C (Hong Kong local) agreed: “Just like Tin Shui Wai. The media’s negative reporting makes the public believe that Tin Shui Wai is a very poor district.”

Mother F (new arrival) noted, “There are few jobs in Tin Shui Wai. Many more jobs are available in Kowloon, but cross-district transportation is so expensive. Commute time is also an issue. Nobody else will take good care of our children.”

Each parent began to whisper to the person sitting next to her, and some of them expressed agreement regarding their difficulties. The SW asked, “Does anyone here have to work?” However, no participants raised their hands or responded. They all looked at one another to see whether anyone was employed. The SW continued, “So you all take care of your own children?”

The participants looked at each other and nodded, before the SW asked, “What difficulties do you face raising children in Hong Kong?”

Mother B: “Children in Hong Kong must be closely monitored.”

SW: “Not those in China?”

Mother B: “They need to be monitored to a lesser extent in China. We had very good relationships with our neighbors there. When we were young, we would never go hungry, as we were greeted by all of our neighbors. But in Hong Kong, the neighbors do not even know one another.”

Although the new arrival participants nodded their agreement to this statement, they did not immediately respond. Mother K (Hong Kong local) noted:

“The traffic in Hong Kong is chaotic; parents must hold their children’s hands when on the road. But I see that some new arrivals let their very young children go out by themselves. These children play on playgrounds without any adult supervision.”

Mother B, who had previously complained about the new arrivals being misunderstood, replied, “There are two types of parents: Those who closely monitor their children and those who let them run around without supervision.”

SW: “Why would that be?”

Mother B: “Some parents have no problem letting their children go out on their own. We were brought up in China without supervision. Even now, the children in our hometown grow up under the sun. However, the children in Hong Kong grow up indoors with toys. We are different.”

As no participant responded further to Mother B’s claims, the SW asked if the new arrivals and their children had ever experienced any discrimination. The participants appeared hesitant to answer.

Mother B: “The locals simply cannot accept the fact that we are smarter than them.”

SW: “Can you explain what you mean by ‘smarter than them?’”

Mother B: “Yes. Previously, I worked in sales in Kowloon. Whenever I performed better than my local Hong Kong coworkers, they would do something to harm me. For example, speak to the boss behind my back.”

SW: “Why? And what did they say about you?”

Mother B: “They simply couldn’t accept the fact that we could be better than them. They would spread rumors that mainlanders must have done something underhanded in order to achieve a better sales performance.”

SW: “How did people know that you were not a Hong Kong local?”

Mother F: “Accent.”

The other mothers nodded their recognition of this statement.

Mother E (Hong Kong local for more than 20 years) observed: “Appearance...” and “Clothes ....”

SW: “What do they wear?”

Mother E: “Mainlanders are not very fashionable.”

Mother F, laughing: “Mainlanders should be more fashionable. Then they’d look much more attractive than Hong Kong locals!”

Immediately, the other mothers began to laugh while strongly agreeing, and some said, “That’s so true.” It is likely that all participants were aware that young female mainlanders in Hong Kong are often perceived as intruders who break up the marriages of Hong Kong couples, and, thus, the comment on the fashion sense of newly arrived women may have been a sarcastic joke. I did not know if I was being overly sensitive or if the other mothers thought similarly. Nevertheless, the discussion on discrimination ended in laughter.

### *Analysis and findings of the first meeting - Emergence of in-group identity*

At the first meeting, the new arrival participants were not only conscious of their identity as immigrants but also defended themselves vigorously and explicitly throughout the conversation. In the beginning, they could not wait to describe the unfair treatment they had experienced. They expressed anger at being misunderstood and labeled as lazy and reliant on social welfare. When Mother B spoke on behalf of the new arrivals, the other parents joined the protest. New arrival parents took the opportunity to explain the reasons behind the misrepresentations expressed by both Hong Kong locals and the media. When Mother C, a local, blamed the media for misrepresenting Tin Shui Wai as a very poor district, a common concern of both groups emerged: the media’s negative reports misrepresenting their public image. New arrivals were concerned with the distorted representations of their behavior and motivations, whereas Hong Kong residents focused on the economic status of Tin Shui Wai residents. Even with such different foci, they were able to break the silence between them and take the first step to engage in discussion about common concerns. Interestingly, this discussion was characterized by individual presentations of their own views or concerns. Neither in-depth values and beliefs held by these people had been touched nor did the perceived differences have a chance to be well understood by the group members. The established shared identity as TSW residents appeared to be merely a label but not sufficient to engage members in deeper mutual understanding of perceived differences, uncovering shared identities, and therefore alleviate negative perceptions towards one another.

Throughout the discussion, the new arrival participants represented themselves as “good” and “responsible,” and thus comparable to the Hong Kong locals, in opposition to other new arrivals who might be “lazy” or “irresponsible.”

They explicitly distinguished “misrepresented new arrivals” from “irresponsible new arrivals.” Their core message seemed to be that many new arrivals were as productive and moral as the locals, and Hong Kong locals and the media misrepresented them as intruders exploiting the welfare system. They defended themselves and sought respect for their identity as new arrivals while at the same time supporting the identity of Hong Kong residents by emphasizing their good qualities and representing themselves as similar to the locals. Deeper meaning sharing among the group members marked the milestone in forming in-group identity for members from both lands. The in-group identity was formed based on shared social values rather than merely a label, TSW resident. Such a breakthrough can be attributed to the social worker’s respectful inquiry to uncover shared values of people of both lands such as working for living instead of relying on welfare. Sharing values and beliefs behind behaviours provided a fair ground for understanding various controversial social issues. Although discussing controversial issues was considered as an act of risk taking, it provided the members with valuable opportunity to engage themselves in understanding perceived differences with meaning and respect.

There was no evidence that these new arrivals devalued their own culture or identity. Instead, they took every opportunity to communicate their values, beliefs, and difficulties to the dominant group. When they compared themselves to Hong Kong locals, they emphasized that they ought to be judged by the same standards as locals and that in this regard they were at least as “responsible and civilized” as locals, if not more so. The local parents listened actively, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the views shared by new arrivals. Situating the discussion within the context of acculturation, the new arrivals’ efforts at integration can be witnessed in their vigorous protest against misrepresentation and misunderstanding (home culture preservation) and in their holding themselves to the same standards as Hong Kong locals.

### *Second meeting: In-depth sharing*

The second sharing session was held a month apart from the first meeting. The same group of participants were invited to join the sharing to address further on parenting issues. Five minutes before the session began, four mothers (new arrivals) were already seated and discussing their living conditions. They greeted me, smiling. A new participant was there, explaining that she had missed the last sharing session and wanted to join this one. She was a new arrival (Mother Cg) who sat down quietly next to the others. A few minutes later, the three local Hong Kong parents arrived.

The group atmosphere was markedly different from the previous session; the

participants greeted each other, were more relaxed, and smiled more frequently. To establish a familiar shared ground for discussion, the SW chose a renowned Chinese poem on parenting, Yan Shi (“A Poem for the Swallows”) (Appendix 1 – Content of the poem). She invited the participants to discuss the meaning of the poem, asking, “Can anyone tell us what it means?”

Mother B: “It tells the story of how swallow parents wholeheartedly care for their little swallows, but the little swallows leave their parents after they grow up.”

SW: “What are your views?”

Mother B: “It’s true, and we need to accept it. We are like that, too.”

The other participants nodded. The SW further elaborated that the poem conveys Chinese values and beliefs concerning family and parenting; it represents the Chinese belief that a parent’s role is to protect and support their children with no expectations of return.

SW: “Do you think parenting is difficult?”

Mother K stated firmly (Hong Kong local): “Yes, very difficult.”

SW: “Why?”

Mother K: “Because the majority of the Tin Shui Wai residents are new arrivals.”

Mother K did not restrain her views or attempt to be cautious, and the new arrivals did not at first defend themselves.

SW: “Do they?” (Meaning: Do the new arrivals usually let their children wander around without supervision?)

In response, Mother K took more than five minutes to list examples of her son’s misbehavior, which she attributed to the bad influence of new arrival children.

Mother Cg: “Some [new arrivals] really do not care about their children. Children as young as three years old can go and play in the playground all by themselves while their parents play Mahjong<sup>1</sup> at home. [Pausing a few seconds] There are two types. Some really care, others don’t. Some of the Hong Kong children are watched over too carefully, which makes new arrival kids seem unsupervised.”

Mother C sounded frustrated: “It is very dangerous out there with bad people and contagious diseases. This morning, for instance, my daughter picked up garbage from the street. It was extremely dirty. She insisted on putting it in the garbage can. That’s not done. She may catch some disease and fall ill.”

Mother B: “I would praise her for doing that.”

Mother E: “But picking up garbage off the street is so dirty!”

Mother B: “I would still praise her for good behavior. She can wipe off or wash her hands later. When we were young, we were very poor in our village in rural China. Rice was very scarce. I remember, one night, I dropped a scoop of cooked rice on the ground, which was rather muddy. My mother ordered me to pick up

the rice and eat it. There was a lot of mud and sand in that scoop of rice; it was really dirty and disgusting, but I still ate it. Therefore, for me, picking things up from the ground is not scary at all [smiling proudly].”

Mother Cg: “I would also let my children do that. They can wash their hands later. Or she can use a napkin to pick up the garbage.”

Mother E: “I wouldn’t.”

Mother E did not appear to be angry at the other parents for disagreeing with her. The discussion session ended with mutual respect and without either side defending its views.

### *Analysis and findings of the second meeting*

#### *– Emergence and development of quality intergroup contact*

During the second session, the new arrivals appeared less explicitly defensive regarding their identity. Using the traditional poem, Yan Shi, as the opening of the sharing was another example about how the group facilitator made use of shared identities among members, namely Chinese and parents, to reveal their shared values amid perceived differences. Yan Shi is a well-known poem in Chinese culture about fidelity of Chinese value. It entails how swallow birds raise their baby birds and how the babies should take care of their parents. The poem on parenthood oriented the members focus on their shared familial values and cultural roots, namely Confucianism, for parenthood rather than merely on observable appearances and behavior, though participants were acutely conscious of the two cultural groups. The social worker skilfully and purposely created a common ground that was agreed and appreciated by the members from both groups. The heightened awareness of shared identity with deeper meaning greatly reduced the perceived intergroup differences and set a foundation for further exchange and discussion.

Although Mother K attributed her son’s misbehavior to the influence of his classmates who had newly arrived from mainland China, the new arrival participants responded to her calmly and as “mothers,” rather than interrupting or talking back in order to defend themselves against misrepresentation. The group members were aware of their fluid identity and actively adopted a shared identity, motherhood, which maximized in-group identity, intergroup similarities, and a sense of common concern (Jarvis 2012). The respectful exchange was later led and facilitated by the group members instead of the social worker. Although Mother K attributed her son’s misbehaviour to the influence of his classmates who were newly arrived from Mainland China, the new arrivals in the group responded to Mother B calmly from a shared perspective as a parent in Hong Kong instead of interrupting or talking back in order to defend their “misrepresented” images, exploring ways to educate children.



Although the participants did not agree on all issues, they explicitly provided underlying reasons – drawn particularly from their life experiences and hardships – for their views, which is a definite milestone in facilitating mutual understanding between groups. The issue about the responsibilities of citizens to not litter and to keep the streets clean illustrated the groups' differing values, which can be attributed to differences in their historical and cultural backgrounds (Abbas 1997). Mother B's story of childhood hardship in mainland China helped to explain why she made light of many situations that Hong Kong locals perceive as life-threatening or "uncivilized." It was an excellent example about perceived differences in parenting values which can be attributed to their different historical and cultural backgrounds and explain why she, as member of new arrival, made light of many situations that Hong Kong locals perceive as life-threatening. This story engage participants in integrative socialization in which participants were mutually open to diversities without devaluing one's home values. The in-depth sharing clarified that the two groups of parents had completely different standards for safety and risk, and thus, the misrepresentation of new arrival parents as irresponsible became more comprehensible to the Hong Kong local parents (Lai 2011). Such quality intergroup exchange heightened participants' awareness about the richness of diversity that stems from people's backgrounds and the resultant values rather than any form of class or cultural superiority.

### *Emergence and development of in-group identity and quality intergroup interaction*

The analysis of the narratives and group dynamics throughout the two sharing sessions illustrated how group dynamics evolved from seeing each other as different groups of "Chinese", to revealing some shared identities, to seeing each other as insiders who have shared identities with shared social values. Intergroup integrative socialization with respectful mutual understanding emerged via the sharing of deeper values. Both groups understood that the differences in these values actually stem from people's backgrounds rather than class or cultural superiority (Jackson 2002). Such understanding is necessary to lay the foundation for the inclusion of "differences" within the dominant culture. The analysis revealed that the social worker played a critical role in exploring and building the awareness of shared identities with shared social values and facilitating mutual understanding of "perceived differences" by engaging participants in inquiry led exchange with empathic understanding and respect.

### *Facilitating positive acculturation through intergroup interaction*

Shared social roles, values, and expectations guide one's social behavior and facilitate the emergence and development of in-group identity in individuals. Integrative socialization with quality intergroup interaction, therefore, provides a key platform for facilitating mutual understanding and embracing and appreciating diversity in our communities (Brown & Hewstone 2005). Precisely because identity awareness is subject to contextual demands, group workers play a significant role in heightening awareness of shared identities and similarities among group members, in turn facilitating the establishment of in-group membership. Being perceived as an "insider" can enhance the quality of intergroup contact, in which mutual and empathetic understanding is achieved through open discussion (Alasuutari 1995).

## **Implications and Recommendations**

Parents, who serve as acculturation models for the next generation, should be oriented to acculturation, in which the home culture is valued and preserved, and participation in the new culture is encouraged. Deeper mutual understanding of the subtle and unobservable values and beliefs of the different cultural groups is possible; it is the key to positive acculturation of new arrivals as well as to facilitate the dominant group's acknowledgment of diversity as part of the dominant culture and contemporary society. The two most important implications that emerge from the findings are the importance of integrative socialization with quality intergroup contact and the need for group facilitation training for parenting educators.

### *Quality intergroup contact*

The function of having quality intergroup contact is to help people from different backgrounds develop mutual understanding through the awareness of common ground, acknowledgment of multiple identities, identification of fluidities and context dependence, and development of respect and appreciation for diversity in their communities (Berry & Kalin 2000).

Quality contact encourages participants to exchange perspectives on the values and beliefs they hold and explain the origin of those values and beliefs. Through an open-minded interaction, people develop a greater sense of understanding of others whose values and backgrounds are different from their own. Exposing and recognizing shared social roles will likely lead to an awareness of common ground and of the standard expectations of these roles. In this study, the participants realized that perceived difference is a matter of experience rather than of nature or ethnic background. Quality contact provides a medium for exploring

similarities as much as differences. Notions such as “not fit” or “abnormal,” which are associated with difference, can be dismantled or turned on their heads when the sources of these differences are understood through both personal and ethnic histories. Exploration of similarities and differences will aid in the construction of more flexible in-group identities that will vary with time, context, and the demands of the moment.

### *Group facilitator*

Quality intergroup contact does not occur in a vacuum. The social worker, also the group facilitator, in this study was equipped with the skills necessary for the creation of an environment open to diversity. The group facilitator established contact in advance and was keenly sensitive to people’s needs and cultural backgrounds. Thus, all participants established an in-group identity and were open and sincere, achieving an empathetic understanding of their differences and recognizing the uniqueness of each individual (Slote & De Vos 1998). On a policy level, in both micro and macro contexts, cultural diversity must be promoted in order to achieve social harmony in a multicultural urban setting.

Stereotypes are transmitted intergenerationally. Promoting positive acculturation in families with children will create a ripple effect of positive adaption within both the dominant and non-dominant cultural groups. This study indicates that parent support sharing group in communities with well-trained facilitators may be accessible and optimal avenues for promoting more holistic understandings between families with diverse backgrounds, values, and beliefs. Such a context provides an ideal platform for heightening the awareness of identity fluidity and the need for mutual accommodation to the ever-changing social demands of increasing diversity within contemporary global and local contexts (Wang & Chang 2010).

### *Concluding remarks*

This study pursues the creation of local and practical knowledge that may significantly resonate with other findings. The latter are useful and vital primarily to the people involved (mainland Chinese who have migrated to Hong Kong, Hong Kong locals, and those living and working directly with these communities) and, secondarily, to the broader community, which shares their concerns (that is, scholars or anyone interested in policy related to these issues) (Mangan & Banks 1999). In other words, the study may not be entirely generalizable.

Despite these limitations, the study offers reflections on practical approaches that may be relevant to countries experiencing internal migration. Family

educators or social workers should be sensitive to the various influences that clearly shape the experiences and quality of life of new arrivals, particularly regarding self-identity and adaptation. Much more can be done, proactively, to help new arrivals become happily acculturated into the mainstream culture as well as helping the mainstream culture to accommodate the new arrivals. Future research should use additional data sources, such as observation inside and outside sharing group, to achieve an in-depth understanding of the actual status of participants' acculturation progress. Nonetheless, the present study has shed some light on immigrants' own perceptions of their acculturation. Policymakers, family educators and social workers should consider promoting interventions and services that target cultivating an open-minded culture appreciative of diversity.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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<sup>1</sup> Mahjong is a tile-based game that was developed in the 19th century in China). Playing Mahjong requires four players sitting around a square table with raised edges. The game is played with a set of 144 tiles based on Chinese characters and symbols. Each player begins by receiving 13 tiles. The winner should meet have the set combination of Chinese characters and symbols (Zhang et al 2020).

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## Appendix 1

### *Content of "A Poem for the Swallows"*

#### **A Poem for the Swallows**

-- Translated by Vincent Poon (2018)

Two swallows were upon a wooden beam,  
a he and a she stood elegantly as a team.  
Clays amassed by their beaks rested between two wooden pilings,  
a nest that hatched four offspring.  
The four offspring grew by the day and night,  
demanding food endlessly as they chirp with all their might.  
Fresh worms were not easy to catch as preys,  
and the young mouths seemed not to be satiated by any day.  
Beaks and talons were about to be tattered,  
yet the minds and bodies knew no tired.  
In an instant, making ten flights to and fro,  
still fearing starvation in the nest might take hold.  
Working hard for thirty days,  
the mother became thin while the chicks gradually gained more weight.  
Murmuring to teach them how to speak,  
brushing every one of their feathery coats to keep them neat.  
Once their wings had grown and could expand,  
it was time to lead them to a straight tree branch;  
the youngsters all spread their wings without looking back,  
taking flight and dispersed with the wind leaving no tracks.  
She and he cried out for the little ones in midair,  
yet not even one return as their voices exhausted in despair;  
the couple returned to the empty nest,  
tweeting all night sad.  
O dear swallows you both should not have been so sad,  
you should have reflected upon yourselves instead:  
the days when you were also little chick toddler,  
you too once took flight and turned your back on your mother.  
Back then, your parent's thoughts of sorrow,  
this day, you shall fully know!