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ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCES OF LIVING IN POVERTY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

WONG KWAI YAU

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The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

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Adolescents' Experiences of Living in Poverty and Implications for Social Work Practice

Wong Kwai Yau

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Abstract

Child poverty is a global problem that demands the attention of governments and communities. Over one-fifth of those living below the poverty line are children under the age of 18. In order to improve social work services for this target population, I studied not only the phenomenon of child poverty in Hong Kong but also, more generally, the diverse effects, including both positive and negative, of poverty on children's development. Most of the current research consists of quantitative studies that contribute to our understanding of childhood poverty by identifying the causes of poverty and poverty's negative effect on children. There is, however, little research that deals with children's own accounts of their experience of living in poverty. Such insight into children's experiences is essential to the improvement of social work interventions.

In 2008, I planned and implemented a study based on collaborative inquiry in order to fill the gap in qualitative research on child poverty. I formed a partnership with a group of 10 adolescents of both sexes and encouraged them to interpret their experiences of poverty and allow their voices to be heard. Through the collaborative inquiry process, the adolescents co-created stories to delineate the life challenges they faced and the methods they had adopted to address these challenges. They were then facilitated to externalize the social and cultural values and beliefs that shaped their interpretation of their experiences. The goal of the study was to develop new theoretical and practical insights, based on the adolescents' subjective experiences of poverty, that could be used to improve current interventions and to design future ones.

The research identified four areas that the adolescents were struggling with and uncovered four ways that adolescents cope with the experience of poverty that have not been received attention in the current literature. The first is the phenomenon of experiencing happiness in spite of poverty, which was evident in the resilience of the adolescents in the study who fought to resist the negative effects of poverty. They described the challenges that had to be overcome in their pursuit of happiness, particularly those connected with family dynamics. The second was tackling socio-economic deprivations: the adolescents in the study found that reframing and

attaching new meaning to their situation was an effective coping mechanism. The third theme was about fighting against materialism in the midst of poverty. The adolescents in the study pitted traditional Chinese values and practices against the materialism that characterises so many human transactions. Their final theme was about striving to escape poverty. Some of the adolescents in the study were determined to improve their lot through education, while others adopted a more fatalistic acceptance of their situation.

An analysis of these four challenges and the coping strategies sheds new light on the psychosocial expectations imposed on adolescents. Kegan (1994) refers to adolescents' developmental challenges as "mental burdens" and considers them culturally specific. This study seeks to identify the expectations that are imposed on poor adolescents, which are often more onerous than those experienced by adolescents in general. The adolescents in the study were also very influenced by moral codes. Gilligan (1982) argues that looking at the ways adolescents deal with dilemmas in relationships gives us insight into their unarticulated stories. This study attempts to identify the social and cultural discourses that dictate how adolescents construct their reality. Gergen (1991), one of the main proponents of social constructionism, argues that such discourses influence adolescents' construction of their experience of poverty and their ways of comprehending life challenges, moral dilemmas, psychosocial life tasks, and mental burdens.

One significant contribution of the present study is a new understanding of the complex and dynamic experience of poverty of Chinese adolescents. Most of the participants in this study show great versatility and resilience in addressing their life challenges, which may be a consequence of their destitute backgrounds. Hong Kong is undergoing rapid social, economic, and political changes, which have shrunk the resources for poor children and made it more difficult for them to develop in an age-appropriate fashion. These findings have implications for social work practice in Hong Kong. This study advocates social work interventions at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels. At the micro level, adolescents should be taught to be more aware of the social and cultural influences that shape their interpretation of their experiences and to refrain from accepting societal and familial expectations unquestioningly. At the mezzo level, social workers should support families living in poverty and train parents

in child rearing and development. At the macro level, social workers should not only provide poor families with social resources but also act as advocates for policy change and institutional reform.

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I would like to take this opportunity, as well, to express my appreciation to my chief supervisor, Dr. Pauline Po Lin Sung-Chan. Without her patience, professional guidance, unfailing support, and motivation, I would not have finished this thesis. I deeply appreciate the contribution of my second supervisor, Professor Yuen Tsang Woon-ki, who encouraged me to enter the PhD program and supported me throughout. Dr. David Ip's graduate seminars were a source of inspiration and reflection. I am also grateful to Dr. Janet Leung of the City University of Hong Kong for her critical reading of the thesis.

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Abbreviations

BGCAHK	**Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong**
COP	**Commission on Poverty**
CSSA	**Comprehensive Social Security Assistance**
DSE	**Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination**
HK	**Hong Kong**
HKU	**The University of Hong Kong**
HKCSS	**Hong Kong Council of Social Service**
HKSAR	**Hong Kong Special Administrative Region**
PATHS	**P.A.T.H.S. to Adulthood – Youth Enhancement Scheme**
SOCO	**Society for Community Organization**
UAPP	**Understanding Adolescent Project (Primary)**
UGC	**University Grants Committee**

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Hong Kong is a relatively wealthy city but poverty is still a matter of public concern. To tackle the problem, the government set up the Commission on Poverty (CoP) in 2005. The Committee updates poverty-line analysis on a yearly basis and refines its analytical framework as appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of poverty-alleviation measures (CoP, 2007; HKSAR, 2012). Young people belong to an age group that is particularly vulnerable to issues associated with poverty. In comparison to other age groups, children and youth from age 6 to18 account for the highest proportion of the population in poverty. It is not surprising that finding ways to alleviate the negative impact of poverty on children and adolescents is high on the social agenda.

Most current research studies on childhood poverty are quantitative and based on a positivist philosophy. These studies contribute to our knowledge of the topic by identifying the factors that contribute to poverty and delineating the causal relationships between poverty and childhood problems. There are no targeted studies based on group inquiry and interviews with children about their experience of poverty. As a social work practitioner, I want to encourage research that will improve my interventions with this particular group. This thesis adopts a qualitative approach to reveal adolescents' subjective experience of poverty. Its aim is to address a gap in the current research: the absence of studies concerned with the lived experiences of adolescents in Hong Kong. The analysis of this research suggests that there are better solutions to the problem of adolescents living in poverty.

The following four sections of this introductory chapter outline the research context. In the first section, I discuss the current research in Hong Kong and the main approach adopted by researchers studying childhood poverty. The second section outlines the rationale for conducting a qualitative study with adolescent interviewees.

I will present the advantages of having a frontline practitioner take on a researcher role in the attempt to improve interventions with poor children. The third section sets out the objectives of the study. This is the first study that involves Hong Kong adolescents in the group inquiry process and uses a qualitative approach to examine their subjective perceptions, interpretations, and experiences of living in poverty. Finally, I will present an overview of the remaining chapters of the thesis.

1.2 Conducting childhood poverty research

Though Hong Kong is a developed city, its government has been criticized for not doing enough to alleviate child poverty (Wong, 2007). In response to public pressure, the government recently established the first official poverty line as half of the median monthly household income (MMHI) of all domestic households in Hong Kong (HKSAR, 2012). According to the official figures released by the Commission on Poverty Hong Kong in 2012, 1.02 million people (403,000 households) or 15.2% of the population were living below the poverty line. Of these, 209,000 were children under the age of 18. In other words, one in five local children were living below the poverty line (HKSAR, 2012). These alarming figures not only forced the government but also the social welfare sector to deal with the issue of child poverty.

Poverty cannot be defined according to statistical figures: it cannot be separated from the inescapable hardships that accompany it. Childhood poverty has become a focus of academic studies, but most of these studies are quantitative. Quantitative studies alone will not provide a full picture of the causes and effects of childhood poverty. As a social worker, I am committed to conducting research that will improve my practice.

1.2.1 Rationale for conducting a qualitative study of adolescents living in poverty

For the past two decades, the quantitative studies on childhood poverty conducted in Hong Kong have been based primarily on theories developed by

Western scholars (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995; Hertzman, 2000; Hirsch, 2007; Kamerman, Neuman, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Sen, 1999; UNICEF, 2007; Willow 2001). These poverty studies usually concentrate on three themes: the definition of poverty, the causes of poverty, and the impact of poverty on the social, psychological, and physical development of children.

1.2.1.1 Studies on the definition of poverty

Various studies conducted outside China deal with the concept of poverty. According to the current literature, poverty should be understood as the discrepancy between people's needs and resources (Dixon, 1999; Gordon, Larsen, Adair, & Popkin, 2003; Kanbur & Squire, 2001; Mayer, 1998, 2002). People are poor when their available resources do not meet their material and social needs, including food, housing, medical care, and access to services such as transport and education. Kanbur and Squire (2001) describe poverty as "the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions" (p. 3). Willow (2001) also depicts the poverty of adolescents in terms of the deprivation of basic needs including food, clothes, and other daily necessities.

Chow (1982), the local scholar, developed a definition of poverty within the context of low-income families in Hong Kong. His findings reveal that poor people in Hong Kong have low incomes and poor living conditions, and are socially isolated. Other studies of poverty in Hong Kong by MacPherson (1994) and HKCSS (2006) also emphasize the deprivation of basic needs such as food and other daily necessities. By defining "poverty," the local scholars aim to create a framework that will provide insight into the actual situation. A breakthrough for poverty research occurred in 2012 with the establishment of an official poverty line. Based on the concept of relative poverty, the poverty line categorised households with incomes below a determined percentage of the median as poor. This understanding of poverty was more accessible and applicable than the more theoretical views expressed by the western scholars (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995; etc.).

1.2.1.2 Studies on the causes of poverty

There is no one single factor that accounts for childhood poverty in Hong Kong. Poor children come from poor families. Feagin (1972) identifies three types of attributes of poverty: "structural" – which focused on external societal and economic factors, 'individualistic' – which emphasized the behaviour of the poor, and "fatalistic" – which placed responsibility on luck and fate.

Blank (2003) and Rank (2004) argue that economic restructuring has led to an increase in poverty. Wong (2007) has shown that this holds true of Hong Kong: families have become poor due to the underemployment arising from the rapid economic restructuring. Employment in Hong Kong's manufacturing sector decreased from 41.3% of total employment in 1981 to 12.3% in 2001 (Wong, 2007). The working poor cannot cover their expenses due to cuts in their working hours and wages. Consequently, the real wage index of low-skilled workers in manufacturing industry decreased from HK$101.1 in 1993 to HK$96.9 in 1997 (Wong, 2000). Some Hong Kong scholars have attributed the high prevalence of child poverty to this restructuring (Lui, 1997; Wong, 2001). From 1990 to 1999, the real income of the poorest quintile of households in Hong Kong decreased by 23.3% (Lui & Wong, 1995; Wong, 2007). The unemployed and underemployed were unable to support themselves due to high rental costs, low salaries, and a rising inflation rate. The reduction of family income led to household poverty and, consequently, childhood poverty.

In addition, inadequate social policies have also contributed to the increasing number of poor people in Hong Kong. Lui and Wong's quantitative study (1995) shows that poor people cannot access and utilize social resources such as employment and training, education, and relevant information. Without these resources, they cannot escape from poverty. Inadequate childcare provision and after-school services discourage parents, especially single mothers or fathers, from re-entering the labour market. Wong's analysis (2007) of Hong Kong statistics draws

attention to the inadequacy of the government's measures to address the causes of poverty.

For instance, the local poverty-alleviation measures such as the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme (CSSA) are not only ineffective but also counter-productive as they establish and maintain a poverty trap (Wong, 2007). Studies of poverty in Hong Kong conclude that the inadequate service support and lack of effective social welfare policies for disadvantaged groups (e.g., new immigrants and single-parent families) had the effect of ensuring that the poor could not escape their situation. More and more adolescents are experiencing poverty because of the financial decline of their families. Studies by Chiu (2003) and Zhao, Zhang, and Sit (2004) also conclude that people who depend on welfare benefits have less incentive to work and, therefore, continue to live in poverty.

Moreover, Feagin (1972) notes that fate is often invoked to explain forces beyond individuals' control such as bad luck and illness. Studies conducted by Shek et al. in Hong Kong (Shek, Lam, Tang, Lam, Tsoi, & Tsang, 2003, 2004) confirm Feagin's view. Chinese culture maintains two opposing beliefs: the belief in people's capacity to overcome adversity and the belief that people are unable to escape their fate. Shek et al.'s studies reveal that in China there is a close relationship between poor adolescents' adjustment to adversity and their notion of fate. Adolescents hold strong views about the external causes of poverty and believe that they have very little control over their lives. They blame their inability to escape from the cycle of poverty on fate.

1.2.1.3 Studies on impacts of poverty on children

Quantitative studies of childhood poverty in the West have yielded many insights. There is a high risk that poverty will have a negative effect on the physical, psychological, and social development of a child (Dixon, 1999; Ross, Schillington, & Lockhead, 1994). Studies have demonstrated the negative impacts of poverty on children in various spheres: emotional and physical health (Hertzman, 2000),

learning ability (Haveman & Wolfe, 1995), and social development (Harper, Marcus, & Moore, 2003). Duncan (1997; Duncan, Bruce, & Edwards, 2003) maintains that deprivation during childhood has long-term adverse effects that often contribute to a lifetime of poverty. His studies have informed many subsequent scholars' attempts to determine the impact of poverty on children.

Children and youth living in poverty often emphasize the negative aspects of their experience, such as the lack of opportunities, and the insecurity of livelihoods, neighbourhoods, and social relationships (Corbett, 1993; Midgley, 1984). Dixon (1999) argues that poor living conditions reduce the opportunities to gain a livelihood. Studies in Hong Kong support this view. According to BGCAHK (2005, 2006, 2007), poor children and adolescents have less active social lives, weaker parent-child relationships, and few outdoor activities. They cannot afford basic learning tools such as dictionaries, reference books, computers, and internet service (BGCAHK, 2007). Poor living conditions also confine their space and affect their physical health (BGCAHK, 2008).

Significantly, poverty can have a tremendous negative impact on adolescents, in particular. It affects their growth and development, both physically and emotionally (Haveman & Wolfe, 1995; Hertzman, 2000). Macpherson (1994) stresses the social impact of poverty: school work, social development, and psychological adjustment are all undermined when an adolescent is unable to participate in the usual activities in a community. Studies conducted by the BGCAHK (2004, 2005, 2007) found high correlations between poverty and low self-esteem and mild to severe emotional and behavioural problems. Poor adolescents spend more hours at home unattended and receive less support from parents during the day. They are more likely to fall ill because they do not receive timely care from their parents (BGCAHK, 2005, 2007).

Poverty hampers a child's development. Studies conducted in the West demonstrate poverty's drastic negative effect on a child's future in terms of

education, income, employment, and self-esteem (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Sen, 1999). Studies conducted by HKCSS (1996, 2006) indicate that adolescents lacking financial and social support from their families have fewer learning opportunities, experience discrimination, and suffer from a low social status. BGCAHK (2006) found that adolescents from poorer households believe they have little chance to attend universities or other institutes of higher education due to their financial difficulties. They feel confined by their hardship. The adolescents' responses also support Shek's (2005) finding that poor adolescents struggle with a sense of hopelessness, and lack of control and self-esteem.

1.2.1.4 Gaps remaining in Western and Hong Kong research

The quantitative approach that is taken in most studies of childhood poverty does not take into account the perceptions of poor children and young people themselves. The prevailing understanding of children's experience of poverty is based on quantitative research that adopts a positivist philosophy. Taking an empirical approach, the authors of these quantitative studies assume that social realities can be broken down into measurable variables and that causal connections are rational and predictable (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). Rigour is achieved through quantitative methods, random samplings, and experimental controls. The quantitative approach prizes rationality, objectivity, and neutrality on the part of the researcher. Studies of childhood poverty in Hong Kong are primarily quantitative with a heavy reliance on statistical analysis. Most deal with the causal relationship between poverty and the experience of hardship. As noted, many of these studies found a statistically significant relationship between poverty and negative impacts on children (BGCAHK, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008; HKCSS, 1996, 2006; Shek, 2005).

Sutton and Staw (1995), however, question the assumptions of the quantitative approach, which relies on a controlled environment in which key variables are held to be constant (Lawler et al., 1985). Such an approach fails to capture the complex world where adolescents are influenced by a multiple, interdependent, and

conflicting forces (Argyris et al., 1985). Studies of poverty in Hong Kong also do not take into account the meaning-making processes of adolescents living in poverty (McKay & Lawson, 2002). The field of poverty studies in Hong Kong needs to capture the dynamic forces that shape the social environment, such as family, school, media, and peers. These forces inform adolescents' interpretation of their situation and their construction of possible solutions (Shahin, 2003). Rank (2004) argues persuasively that any practical conceptual framework must be set in the context of childhood stages. Listening to adolescents' voices enables us to have a better understanding of their everyday life. With such an understanding, social workers can establish developmentally appropriate interventions to help adolescents cope with the negative impact of poverty and meet future challenges.

1.2.2 A social work practitioner's rationale for conducting a qualitative study

Leung and Shek (2011) argue that the prevailing social work practice is rooted in positivist philosophy; it is the epistemological framework that guides professional practice. The quantitative research method has been widely used in poverty studies because it is assumed that scientific procedures can overcome ignorance, bias, and prejudice. The prevailing view also stresses the benefits of scientific thought, rationality, objectivity, and neutrality on the part of the practitioner (Leung & Shek, 2011). Undoubtedly, enrolling in a doctoral course gave me the opportunity to engage in critical reflection on ways of knowing, which challenged my previous assumptions. Schon (1983, 1987) believes that social work practitioners should engage in reflective thinking and that their interventions should represent reflection-in-action. After reflecting on my practice, I realized there were strong reasons for adopting the qualitative paradigm to conduct this study.

1.2.2.1 Personal reflections on ways of knowing

From 1988 to 2008, I served economically deprived children and youth. They came from poor backgrounds and lived in public housing. As a social work

practitioner, I knew I must have a good understanding of people's needs in order to help them resolve their problems. During that decade, I subscribed to the positivistic approach to social work. As the key researcher at my organization, I adopted a quantitative approach in five studies of poor children and youth in Hong Kong (BGCAHK, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008).

Chambers (2003) observes that quantitative research usually uses standard sampling techniques, questionnaires, and statistical analysis. Statistical findings can provide insight into complex issues associated with poverty by applying time series comparisons to measure trends, produce correlations, and identify associations that raise questions of causality and covariant changes (Chamber, 2003). This reliance on scientific thought, rationality, objectivity, and the neutrality of the practitioner is highly valued by Hong Kong scholars, who also adopt a positivistic approach. They are urged to judge their work according to scientific principles, and to demonstrate the utility of their theories and intervention strategies based on a positivistic paradigm of child poverty.

Social scientists, however, have begun to question whether knowledge constructed according to the positivistic approach is relevant to their field. They are concerned that positivistic theories and findings, while meeting the test of scientific validity, are not applicable to practice (Argyris et al., 1985). Qualitative research epistemology and methodology, which has become more prominent in the West, is a fruitful alternative (Padgett, 1998; Shaw & Gould, 2001; Sherman & Reid, 1994). Quantitative research has the merits of objectivity, good predictive and explanatory power, parsimony, precision, and sophistication of analysis. Qualitative research, in contrast, provides a detailed, holistic, in-depth understanding of social reality and encourages new insights (Leung & Shek, 2011). Given its methodological appropriateness, design flexibility, and situational responsiveness, a qualitative approach to research will enrich our knowledge of childhood poverty in Hong Kong.

The postmodern epistemological framework celebrates differences and acknowledges the importance of a socially inclusive practice dialogue. It appreciates "otherness": all individuals and groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and to have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate. The formation of partnerships between social workers and service users requires the transcendence of professional boundaries and the recognition that knowledge possessed by service users is valid, insightful, and critical for reducing external manipulation (Healy, 2000). Traditional models are replaced with deconstructive ones that encourage open-ended dialogue between social workers and service users, and challenge the way power is invested in all exchanges. Subject-object relationships are supplanted by new modes of dialogue. By using a narrative analysis, it is possible to deconstruct the kinds of power relationships by which individuals are positioned, such as those of gender, race, sexuality, poverty, and social exclusion (Healy, 2000). Powell (2001) maintains that social work practice should foster a multiplicity of visions and not confine itself to the plight of one individual or a general program of social change.

Qualitative inquiry complements conventional scientific inquiry. From a qualitative perspective, knowledge is not a measure of reality that is separate from the knower or the process of knowing. The process of human knowledge is subjective, that is, a matter of interpretation. One cannot understand human behaviour without understanding the framework within which humans interpret their thoughts, feelings, and actions. The reality of childhood poverty is not experienced directly but filtered through the human processes of knowing and meaning- making. The aim of qualitative study is not to search out "truth" or "reality" according to a set of prior theories but to discover how people have made sense of their experiences and what effect those interpretations have had on their lives.

1.2.2.2 Developing practice knowledge through collaborative inquiry

To gain the practical knowledge needed to improve service for adolescents, I embarked on a collaborative inquiry. Irving (1994) argues that social work calls for a

new understanding of civic life based on the citizen's democratic right to act as an individual in an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world. There is a risk that the voices of the service-users, who are relatively powerless, will be distorted to serve the interests of professionals (Hess & Mullen 1995). Due to its collaborative nature, this study will not fall prey to that risk.

Involving adolescents in the research process would offer insight into the way they make sense of poverty and its associated challenges, dilemmas, and tensions. It would also enhance their capacity to find meaning in their own situation and enable them to take charge of the meaning-construction process. Such an inherently reflexive and responsive approach was ideally suited to the study (Anderson, 1990; Auletta, 1983; Dunbar, 1988; Stack, 1974).

Rank (1994), who has researched the plight of poor adolescents, also advocates a subjective approach: the researcher should ask interviewees about their experience of poverty and to listen to their stories. When poor adolescents are allowed to describe their living situations, they redefine the problem and create a new discourse that allows mutual understanding. Reid (1994) stresses that practical wisdom relies on insights derived from working with clients and from theories that emerge from their observations and reflections. Listening to adolescents' voices will allow us to have a better understanding of their life situation and, consequently, improve social work practice.

1.3 Objectives of the study

After presenting a review of the literature on childhood poverty in Hong Kong, this study will attempt to fill the gaps in the research. It will give voice to adolescents' own experiences of living in poverty.There is an alternative way to understand the human world with its system of voices, meanings, understandings, needs, and purposes. Qualitative research provides a detailed, holistic, in-depth understanding of social reality and allows for new insights. This qualitative research study has three general objectives:

i) to identify the gaps in current studies of adolescent poverty in Hong Kong;

ii) to generate knowledge by adopting a social constructionist perspective and exploring the participants' subjective experiences of poverty; and

iii) to develop both theoretical and practical insights for social work practitioners who work with young people living in poverty.

1.4 Organization of the thesis

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. This chapter has outlined the background of the study, as well as its rationales and research objectives. Chapter 2 provides a literature review of qualitative studies on childhood poverty and identifies gaps in the existing literature. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology and covers the selection of the methodology, research questions, formation of the inquiry group, inquiry process, and approaches to data collection and analysis. It also includes the profiles of the participants.

Chapters 4 to 7 present and discuss the data analysis. Chapter 4, "Experiencing happiness in spite of poverty," reveals the adolescents' experience of poverty and their struggle to pursue happiness. Chapter 5, "Tackling socio-economic deprivation," deals with the challenges created by deprivation. In Chapter 6, "Fighting materialism in the midst of poverty," the adolescents describe how materialism and consumerism have shaped their experiences. Chapter 7, "Striving to escape poverty," presents the dilemma many adolescents face—whether to attempt to escape poverty through education or accept their fate. Adopting a social constructionist perspective, each analysis chapter provides insight into poor adolescents' relationships and mental burdens, and the social and cultural discourses that frame their experiences of poverty, and their search for solutions.

The final chapter, "Conclusion and implications for social work practice," is divided into four sections. The first discuss the key findings of the study. The second section is to evaluate how the adopted research approach answers the research questions and the reflection. The third part of the final chapter outlines the

implications for social work practice. The fourth section sets out the limitations of study and potential areas for future research.

1.5 Summary of the chapter

Children and adolescents are the foremost concern of a society because they represent the future. They from financially deprived families are therefore the targets of social policy and service provision. Quantitative research conducted in the West provides overwhelming evidence of poverty's negative impact on children's growth and development. It also exposes the long-term negative consequence of poverty from one generation to the next (i.e., intergenerational poverty). These quantitative studies have long been the source of social work practitioners' knowledge of the causes and impacts of poverty in childhood and adolescence. To enlarge my understanding of this issue and improve my practice, I plan to take an alternative approach. A qualitative study can provide a detailed, holistic, and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of child poverty. The qualitative approach also complements the conventional scientific knowledge: it allows us to gain insight into young people's lived experience of poverty and inspiration for future practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

To improve the strategies of social work practitioners, it is important that research not only increase our understanding of a problem but also suggest new and better means of providing services. There are many local studies that offer descriptive and explanatory accounts of the phenomenon of childhood poverty in Hong Kong, but they do not deal with young people's subjective interpretation and lived experience of poverty. We really know very little about adolescents' direct response to poverty—their thoughts, feelings, and everyday life experiences.

The chapter reviews the qualitative literature dealing with young people's experience of poverty in order to determine the best direction for effective research. The first section of the chapter outlines two emerging trends in the research on adolescent poverty, based on seven large Western studies and three studies that focus on the situation in Hong Kong. The second section examines the practical insights that these studies afford for the social work practitioner and identifies gaps in the research. The final section proposes research directions for the development of new practical knowledge on childhood poverty through qualitative inquiry.

2.2 Review of the qualitative literature on childhood poverty

As noted, qualitative methodology has recently emerged as a complementary alternative to the quantitative method in the social work profession. Qualitative poverty studies from the perspective of children and adolescents are relatively new, both globally and locally (Ridge, 2009, Leung and Shek, 2011). This new research development has added considerably to social work practitioner's understanding of young people coming from poor families. In the West, the predominant studies in this field have been conducted by Morrow (2001), Ridge (2002, 2007), Willow (2001),

Van der Hoek (2005), Sutton, Smith, Dearden, and Middleton (2007), and Wikeley, Bullock, Muscham, and Ridge (2007). Three local studies by Hong Kong University (HKU) and Society for Community Organization (SoCo) (2002), Lam, Lam, Shek, and Tang (2004), and Ma (2005) are also illuminating. Two major research trends emerge from these 10 studies. The first focuses on a contextual understanding of children and adolescents' living situations and the second on the role of culture in childhood poverty.

2.2.1 Understanding the context of childhood poverty

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) argue that practitioners learn most from research studies that are grounded in practice and are targeted to the specific context in which they work. Greenwood and Levin (1998) hold that ordinary people, even children and adolescents, are quite capable of developing their own ideas and interpretations of their experience, which can be the source of valuable contextual knowledge. Researchers of adolescent poverty, therefore, should conduct studies that encourage adolescents to talk about their experiences. Healy (2000) explains that practitioners should conduct research that helps generate serviceable knowledge.

Undoubtedly, the seven Western studies have contributed to the contextual understanding young people living under poverty by identifying five life challenges. The participants were able to provide "insider" knowledge of the routines, interactions, and practices of their daily lives; their relationships, particularly with their family; their feelings about their living conditions and physical environment; and their means of coping with financial difficulties.
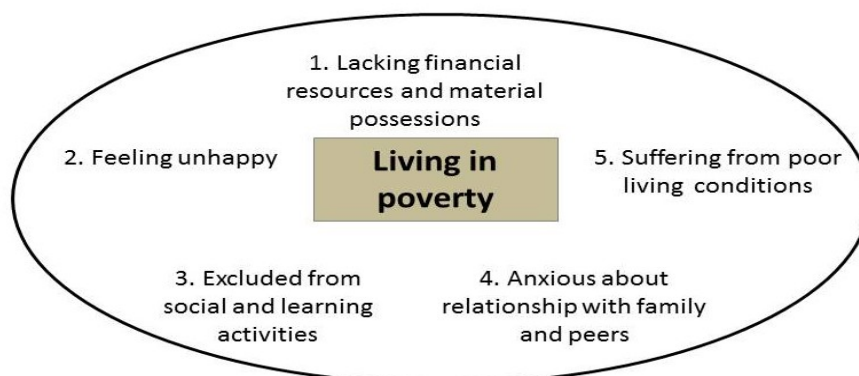
Figure 1: Contextual understanding of adolescents' experience of poverty

2.2.1.1 Lack of financial resources and material possessions

The children and adolescents who participated in the studies were all concerned about the sufficiency of their family's income. They were worried that their families did not have the resources to meet their needs. Many felt deprived and unhappy because they had to go without things that other children had. They were frustrated by their inability to fulfil their own wants and desires. The lack of certain material possessions presents considerable difficulties for young people who strive to maintain status among their peers in a consumer culture:

> *I knew that what I wanted couldn't have been that important to go and ask for money, and I just... I just won't ask 'cos I don't like asking for anything (Ridge, 2002: 98).*

> *I want a new schoolbag... my current one is childish and broken already... I want to buy stationery, but I cannot (HKU & SoCo, 2002: 21)*

Wikeley, Bullock, Muscham, and Ridge (2007) examined the ways poor children spent their time when not in school and the effect of after-school educational activities. Not surprisingly, they discovered that these children were enrolled in significantly fewer after-school activities than their more affluent peers. Their lack of

participation even extended to after-school activities offered by their school. Children who did engage in after-school activities enjoyed clear benefits, not only in the development of skills but also in stronger peer and teacher relationships.

2.2.1.2 Unhappiness due to poverty

It is not surprising that most studies of children and adolescents living in poverty come to the conclusion that economic hardship has an adverse effect on well-being. Unlike their more well-to-do peers, young people who are poor face social challenges on a daily basis. Economic and material constraints structure and inform their lives. Children and youth living in poverty are more likely to experience anxiety and psychological problems. Their lives are more challenging, more frustrating, and more likely to be unhappy.

Ridge (2002, 2007) asked interviewees to compare their experiences and perceptions before and after their mother's return to work. In low-income families, most mothers return to work when their children are young and are often compelled to leave them unattended. The children whose mothers gained secure employment reported a greater sense of financial security, accompanied by increases in social activities and school engagement, a general satisfaction with their present circumstances, and a relief from anxiety. Those whose mothers were only able to find insecure or unstable employment, in contrast, still feared social exclusion and disappointment. An 11-year-old boy did not tell his parents about school trips because they would strain the family finances:

> *I don't usually go on trips 'cos they are expensive and that... At our school, they do loads of activities and they go to loads of different places... I don't bother asking. (Ridge, 2002: 77)*

2.2.1.3 Lack of participation in social and learning activities

The children and youth in all of the studies expressed strong views about the consequences of their inability to participate in after-school social and educational activities. Often this was due to lack of funds for transportation, membership fees,

uniforms, or equipment. As a result, they suffered from a sense of exclusion.

Van der Hoek (2005) examined the strategies young people adopt to cope with poverty. Interviews were conducted with six- to16-year-old children/adolescents (and their parents) from 65 families whose income was at the national minimum benefit level. The study relies on the children's views expressed during in-depth interviews. The children complained that poverty had restricted their opportunities to do well in school as they could not afford resources such as study guides, and had also restricted their social life since they were unable to go on school trips or participate in other activities. The lack adequate transport also contributed to their sense of leading a restricted life. The children in the study were not hopeful that their situation would change. The study concluded that poverty had a negative impact on social and educational development.

Willow (2001) also explored how poverty affects young people. Her study is based on the input of 106 children between the ages of 11 and 14, who lived in areas of dire poverty and social deprivation. Various methods were used to encourage participation, including storybook chats with the younger participants and group discussions among the older ones. The study found that the children's school experience was diminished by fears of being the target of bullying or being considered different. They felt that leisure activities, social networks, and friendships were vital to their happiness and development. They saw shared activities as valued and important. They blamed poverty for limiting their opportunities to begin and sustain friendships. A 12-year-old girl explained why she did not participate in school activities:

> *If you don't have the same clothes as other people, they say that you've got rags. If the whole school has got the same clothes except for you, they will tease you until you have the right clothes… when you don't have any clothes and you don't have any shoes people bully and people laugh at you when you go somewhere. (Willow, 2001: 19)*

Sutton et al. (2007) also found that poor children show low levels of

participation in organised after-school activities. Impoverished neighbourhoods rarely provide safe spaces for play and, therefore, do not encourage friendships or shared socializing. Neighbourhood safety is also a key concern, particularly for children in disadvantaged areas where the street is the only playground. Sutton et al. discovered that the term "poverty" carries a stigma: the children were reluctant to be identified as poor and reserved the term for those who were even less well off. A strong sense of injustice is also common:

> *Researcher: Is life more unfair to some children than others?*
> *Girl: Yes, it is. It is, it's unfair for us because we have no money to do what I want to.*
> *Researcher: But isn't that the same for all children?*
> *Girl: No. It's not, because if you're rich you can get to go to what you want to be. (Sutton et al., 2007: 22)*

2.2.1.4 Anxiety about peer and family relationships

Poverty has a significant impact on young people's everyday lives and social interactions with peers. Having financial resources allows children to be accepted by their peers. Those without such resources strive to be included but are often set apart, causing anxiety, unhappiness, and social insecurity. Adolescents complain about being teased and mocked because they do not have enough money to go out.

Morrow (2001) used case studies to explore the concept of social capital as it relates to the youth (Morrow, 2001). Her research was based on interviews with 101 children between the ages of 12 and 15 living in areas of dire poverty. She too found that social networks and friendships are vital to children and adolescents' sense of belonging and well-being. Young people see friendship as a form of protection and support. Good friendships confer social security connection. Due to their living conditions, however, the youth interviewed had very small interpersonal networks and little access to community networks and associations. A 14-year-old girl complained that there was no place where young people could meet and socialise:

> *Keep on saying to them, "need more facilities so don't get bored".*

[They] say they will do it but [they] never really do it. (Morrow, 2001: 160)

Ridge (2002) also reveals the extent to which poverty and social exclusion affect adolescents' perceptions of their social and familial lives. She conducted in-depth interviews with children between the ages of 10 and 17, though most were at the younger end of the spectrum, between 10 and 12. After comprehensive discussions about their experiences and perceptions, he concluded that poor children, unlike their better-off peers, face difficult social challenges on a daily basis. Their fear of being ostracised was exacerbated by the certain knowledge that other children were doing more and having more.

2.2.1.5 Poor living conditions

Living conditions are a critical issue for low-income youth who are likely to live in substandard, inadequate, unfit, and impermanent housing. Their homes are often damp, cold, rundown, dirty, vermin-infested, and overcrowded. Poor housing conditions affect children's health and well-being, and make it difficult to rest, study, or enjoy oneself at home. Public space is highly valued, but is often without facilities. An 11-year-old boy craved the public space of more affluent neighbourhoods:

They go into town and go swimming and that and they play football and they go to other places and I can't go... because some of them cost money and that. (Ridge, 2002:102)

HKU and SoCo (2002) pursued both qualitative and quantitative research, and used purpose sampling when interviewing Hong Kong youth between the ages of 8 to 15. The qualitative section of their study explores the views of children from low-income families on their living environment, education, parenting, nutrition and health, social life, emotional development, and self-perception. The participants complained that their lives were boring because they were unable to participate in social and learning activities. Their living conditions and environment were bleak:

Boy: We only occupy one room. The living room is shared with others.

One man rents another room to store his clothes, and his washing
machine is placed outside his room. Sometimes he even put his clothes
outside and we even don't have enough space to have our meal.
Researcher: Where do you study?
Boy: I study on my bed, with the quilt and my pillow.
(HKU & SoCo, 2002:18)

2.2.2 The role of culture in shaping interpretations of poverty

The three Hong Kong studies stress the need to determine the effect of cultural beliefs and values on young people's experiences of poverty. These qualitative studies are culturally specific. One of the great advantages of qualitative research is that it can be contextually sensitive.

In Hong Kong, children and adolescents living in poverty believe that they can change the course of their life by increasing their family's income through employment. Some even see advantages in the experience of poverty: they endorse Chinese beliefs about the strengthening effects of adversity and they are more psychologically sound and socially adjusted than their counterparts in the West. Their accounts reveal that familial support can compensate for the deprivations associated with poverty. They also believe that education will enable them to get employment and escape the poverty cycle.

Ma's 2005 study "Living in poverty: A qualitative inquiry of emaciated adolescents and young women coming from low-income families in a Chinese context," explores the experiences of seven emaciated Chinese adolescents and young adults from low-income families, their family difficulties and needs, and their resilience. The subjects were clearly suffering due to family difficulties, including problems with parenting, inadequate financial resources, and insufficient information and access to health and social services. Their recovery was dependent on their family willingness to offer support and their own sense of filial piety (Xian Dao, 孝道).

Lam et al. (2004) also examined how Chinese adolescents from low-income families cope with poverty. Their study too looked at the experience in poverty from the perspective of Chinese culture. During the in-depth interviews, the adolescents did not express a bitter sense of deprivation or even a negative perception of poverty. They had positive feelings about their present and future lives.

These local studies suggest that Chinese adolescents living in poverty are protected by various factors that give them resilience.   These factors are personal (poverty does not strike them as an enormous burden), familial (they receive support from parents and siblings), cultural (their culture sees poverty as a challenge), and contextual (the boundaries between the poor and well-off are blurred). These studies' findings highlight the distinctiveness of the Chinese culture and its effect on socialisation and perceptions of poverty. The participants agreed that their families played the biggest role in helping them to cope with financial hardships.

2.3 Knowledge gaps in existing qualitative studies

The 10 studies discussed above provide important research directions for practitioners wishing to expand their understanding of childhood poverty. In this section, I will describe how my research will be informed by the two trends evident in these recent studies—the need for contextual understanding and the importance of effects of culture. To provide a theoretical background, I will refer to the tenets of social constructionism, which deal with interactions in relational networks, such as family and peers, and ways to make sense of life experiences (Gergen, 1991). Two prominent developmental psychologists, Gilligan (1982) and Kegan (1994), have conducted studies that allow adolescents to give voice to their struggles. Definitely, the Gergen, Gilligan and Kegan's theories really enrich the scope of local poverty study to collect the adolescents' voices and undiscovered areas which can contribute to fill the gaps of the existing knowledge and studies in local context.

2.3.1 Themes identified in the existing research

The primary concern of social work practitioners is to help service-users overcome their life challenges. The current literature sheds light on childhood poverty and its effects but does not provide direction for social work practice. As noted, the Western studies do not take into account many social and cultural factors that affect in adolescents' experience of poverty. As Ridge (2007) observes, our "understanding of the impact of poverty and our insight into how children might interpret and mediate the experience of poverty in childhood is still relatively limited" (p. 29). The studies do cover two research topics that provide very useful information for the practitioner: the influence of social and cultural discourse on young people's experience of poverty, and the effects of poverty on peer and parental relationships.

Another local studies conducted by Lam et al. (2004) and Ma (2005) look at childhood poverty in terms of family dynamics. They focus on the roles of family members living in poverty and their perception of their experiences. These local studies are culturally specific: unlike the Western studies, they take into account the social and cultural factors that shape the children and adolescents' interpretation of experience. The new insights such studies afford can be usefully combined with social work practice.

All the studies highlight the effects of poverty on relationships. The young people that took part in Willow's (2001) study describe the dilemmas and tensions in their relationship with their friends. Ridge (2002) observes that the children in her study were "engaged in intense social and personal endeavour to maintain social acceptance and social inclusion within the accepted cultural demands of childhood, a struggle that is defined and circumscribed by the material and social realities of their lives" (141). Conflicts sometimes arise between children and parents when the latter are burdened by severe financial pressures, long working hours, and the added responsibility of child care.

2.3.2 Underestimating young people's contribution to research

When compared to the Western studies, the Hong Kong studies show less willingness to include young people in the inquiry process. They require the participants to provide responses to questions or topics proposed by researcher. The participants were guided in their discussion of their experiences of poverty. The voices of the young people involved in the research, however, provide a contextual understanding of their life challenges. They should not be merely the subjects of the research; instead, they should be informants, presenting their experiences and perceptions of living in poverty. Action researchers such as Reason and Bradbury (2001) argue that participants in studies should be encouraged to pursue practical solutions through the participation process. Therefore, young people's knowledge should be valued and prioritized.

From the perspective of social work practice, taking the participatory approach to research on childhood poverty helps practitioners develop local practice and intervention knowledge that addresses service-users' own needs and makes a difference to their daily lives. Young people involved in the collaborative inquiry process are given free rein to develop their own ideas about their ongoing problems, make sense of their world, and exercise their practical knowledge (Reid, 1994). They are quite capable of developing their own ideas and can work together in a collaborative inquiry group to see if these ideas work in practice. Until now there has been no local qualitative study that has allowed young people to participate as co-researchers. The application the participatory research approach advocated by Sutton et al. (2007) will extend and enrich Hong Kong research.

2.3.3 The lack of a comprehensive understanding of young people's experience of poverty

As noted, the 10 qualitative studies dealing with childhood poverty provide significant contextual knowledge of adolescents' experiences and the local studies

have exposed some earlier gaps in the research. Four topics recur in these studies: young people's experiences of socio-economic deprivation; deprivation's effects on relationships; lack of social participation; and the role of the prevailing culture.

As Van der Hoek's (2005) study demonstrates, children and adolescents feel that poverty reduces their opportunity for social activities. All the studies revealed that the children and adolescents experience anxiety related to living in poverty. They are afraid there will not be enough money for books, food, and clothing, and so on (e.g., HKU & SoCo, 2002; Ridge, 2007). The studies also show the dilemmas and tensions that beset the relationships of these youth. Ma (2007), who supplies a social and cultural context, notes that the Chinese value of filial piety (孝道) helps young people withstand the negative impact of poverty.

However, the findings come from different studies of different places, with different histories and different target groups. The local knowledge is really lack of the comprehensive picture of young people's experiences of poverty and the analysis of different dimensions in the single study. The social construction approach to adolescents' experience of poverty is based on the view that reality is a construct. There is no objective reality, only our own perceptions of it. It is important to understand the various dimensions of adolescents' subjective experience of poverty, including their personal feelings and thoughts, their interactions with families and peers, and their social and cultural influences. Therefore, there is an urgent need to have a thorough and comprehensive study of adolescents' experience of poverty.

2.4 Increasing our understanding of adolescents' experience of poverty through qualitative study

The 10 studies discussed above offer new insights into the rich experiences of the children and adolescents, insights that can be gained only by adopting a qualitative method. Social constructionism does not consider knowledge to be a measure of reality that is separable from the knower or the process of knowing. As

James and James (2008) maintain, "'reality' is negotiated in everyday life through people's interactions and through sets of discourses" (p. 122). Various "realities" arise from the interactions people have with each other and their environment. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) argue that practitioners must focus on the living practice rather than the theoretical model, on the specific situation rather than the universal law. In order to take such an approach to the study of adolescents living in poverty in Hong Kong, I propose to proceed by taking a social constructionist perspective, examining both adolescents' relationships and their social and cultural context, adopting a collaborative inquiry methodology, and taking a child-centred approach.

2.4.1 Application of social constructionism

One of the premises of this study is that there is no universal truth: a person's "reality" is one in a number of conceptual frameworks (Midgley, 1999). The reality of adolescent poverty is not being tested, measured, or sought. It is not discovered, but "created" and "recreated." The process of attaining knowledge is subjective and a matter of interpretation. The phenomenon of "multiple realities" is expressed and structured through language, which can regulate human behaviour (Powell, 2001). According to Gergen (1985), a key proponent of social constructionism, language is used to mediate human development and interaction in cultural and historical contexts. Gergen (1991) postulates that the original concept of self was eroded in modern society because of social saturation and that a new concept of self, as a public creation, has emerged. He observes that "one's identity is continuously emergent, reformed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships" (1991: 139).

Gergen (1985) argues that what is described, understood, and even seen is not a consequence of the nature of the world but of the meanings of a society. Research that takes a social constructionist approach considers interviewees to be informants and participants in research processes, representing their subjective experiences and perceptions. Childhood poverty and the lived experience of poor adolescents are not

objective and measurable phenomena: they are mediated, indeed constituted, through language, conversation, and discourse. Much of the research on childhood poverty, however, overlooks the socio-cultural contexts that frame young people's interpretation of their experience of poverty.

2.4.2 Examination of the effect of poverty on adolescents' relationships and the influence of social and cultural discourse

Willow (2001) explores how adolescents experience dilemmas and tensions in their relationship with their friends. The effect of peer groups is the focus of Gilligan's discussion of the "relational dilemma" (1982). Gilligan's studies (1982, 1991, 2003) deal with moral arguments in the context of social relationships. By exploring actual situations of moral conflict and choice, the studies show how people construct moral conflicts and choices, what they see as the moral problem or question, and how moral language comes into play in shaping the choices they consider and the actions they take. If their relationship with others is healthy, the self is more than likely to be healthy. If the relationship is tense, the self is more likely to be tense (Gilligan, 1982). This kind of analysis is essential to social constructionism.

According to Gergen (1991), relational processes, as well as cultural and historical influences, shape a "self" that does not exist objectively and independently. Individuals are created within relationships and are constantly reconstructed in accordance with the historical, cultural, and social milieu in which these relationships are embedded. Gergen (1994, 2009) maintains that a person's account of an experience is not a description of an independently existing phenomenon but an artefact of the process of social interaction. Social and cultural factors may mediate these experiences. Adolescents' experience of poverty, therefore, is deeply connected to it specific place in cultural, political, and historical evolution. Kegan (1982) portrays individuals as meaning makers and explorers of inner experiences; however, ultimately, society transforms an individual's self because of the influence of culture

and societal expectations on outward behaviours.

2.4.3 Collaborative inquiry methodology

As noted, interviewees should be considered "participants in" rather than "subjects of" research. Wikeley et al.'s (2007) study adopted the participatory approach to engage the children throughout the inquiry process. Their primary aim was not to describe or interpret social situations, to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge in a field, or to deconstruct taken-for-granted realities. Instead, their aim was to ensure that the voices of the children and adolescents were given attention, so that their experiences and concerns could be articulated, realized, and communicated as directly as possible. In this study, the involvement of adolescents in the inquiry process is undertaken for the same reason.

As Reason and Bradbury (2001) note, the participatory perspective brings together action and reflection, as well as theory and practice. Geertz (1983) maintains that the knowledge that is important for practitioners is the practical knowledge of new skills and abilities. Practical knowledge is better gleaned from people's actions and the way they reflect on them than from scholarly works (Reason & Torbert, 2001). Hence, collaborative inquiry allows for the co-creation of group knowledge. It involves both those describing their experiences and those conducting the research. Therefore, it can achieve two goals: knowledge production through education and social-political action, and empowerment through construction of meanings (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). An inquiry process that involves youth who are experiencing poverty adds a vital social and relational dimension to our understanding of the impact of poverty and is crucial to the formation of effective policies on the provision of welfare and services, social and economic support, and the alleviation of poverty.

2.4.4 Adopting a child-centred approach

As Qvortrup, Marjatta, Giovanni, and Helmut (1994) point out, developmental approaches position children and adolescents as ontologically different from adults. Young people usually consider themselves to have a lower status and less power than adults. The domination of adult-centric approaches to child poverty studies have suppressed children's accounts of their lived reality (Prout, 2005). Childhood should be the unit of analysis and children the unit of observation. The experience of poverty, coupled with the status of childhood, means that children can be doubly silenced, and their experiences and concerns can remain unheard.

The new sociology of childhood is grounded in an appreciation that children actively construct their own identities and that identity constitution "works for children as much as it does for adults" (Jenkins, 2004: 58). Ridge (2002, 2007) and Van der Hoek's (2005) take a child-centred approach to their research on childhood poverty. It is important to include young people's perspective in the analysis: they are not merely passive members of households, but individuals with their own views, attitudes, and experiences (Middleton, Ashworth, & Walker, 1994; Shropshire & Middleton, 1999).

The shift in the conceptualization of children and childhood has brought about a shift in research on children. For Ridge (2002), the "child-centred approach" locates children's own meanings and interests at the centre of the research process. The children are the experts when it comes to their own discourse and agency, so their interpretation of their experiences is of tremendous value. This reconstruction of the concept of childhood has significant implications for poverty studies and social work practice.

2.5 Summary of the chapter

This chapter looks at qualitative studies on young people's experience of poverty. The 10 studies under review provide a rich knowledge and contextual understanding of different aspects of children and adolescents' experience of poverty.

These current studies have helped to develop the contextual framework for understanding the major challenges of poor adolescents. In this study, we will rely on some of their most effective research methods: Wikeley et al.'s (2007) participatory approach; Ridge (2002, 2007) and Van der Hoek's (2005) child-centred approach; Lam et al.'s (2004) and Ma's (2005) incorporation of familial and cultural dimensions.

Postmodern paradigms stress the search for practical knowledge that can improve service. As Reid (1994) maintains, the practitioner must relinquish power and retreat from an expert position. This study combines the strengths of several approaches: social constructionism, contextualism (i.e., the influence of relationships and social and cultural discourse), a collaborative inquiry methodology, and a child-centred focus. Therefore, the adolescents are invited to share their stories about their experiences of poverty and to collaborate in the inquiry and practical processes.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Inquiry Process

3.1 Introduction

The main purpose of this study is to identify knowledge gaps and to gain theoretical and practical insight that will improve social work services for young people living in poverty. Research employs a systematic, formal, rigorous, and precise process in order to discover and interpret facts and relationships, and, for practitioners, to improve service (Waltz & Bausell, 1981). As noted, there are some gaps in the local knowledge: there is very little research based on Hong Kong adolescents' own perceptions and interpretations of their experience of poverty. Therefore, the qualitative research I have undertaken in this study not only deepens my understanding of the nature of the problem but also gives me tools to effect positive change. Carr and Kemmis (1983, 1986) and Schwandt (1997) point out that practical knowledge differs from scholarly knowledge because the former is expressed in people's action and the way they reflect on them. As Schwandt (1997) states, "practical knowledge aims to actually move people, not simply give them good ideas" (81). To gain such practical knowledge, the research methodology must integrate collaboration, interaction, and construction, and not confine itself to "expert" opinion and scientific procedures.

The rest of this chapter is divided into five sections: methodology, research design, ethical issues and research validity, the formation and profiles of the inquiry group, and a description of actual collaborative process. The first section provides the rationale for choosing collaborative inquiry as the research method. The second covers research design, data collection and analysis, and the narrative approach taken. The safeguards employed to ensure that the research process is ethical and the findings valid are outlined in the third section. The fourth and fifth sections deal directly with the inquiry process. The former outlines the formation of the inquiry

group, including the recruitment criteria and the profiles of the participants. The final section describes how the inquiry process proceeded and the major findings of the studies collected.

The inquiry process was developed to allow adolescents to offer their own interpretation of their lived experiences of poverty. Through group narratives, the adolescents revealed their experiences of the socio-economic deprivations, problematic relations, and challenges associated with living in poverty. The study also draws attention to the Chinese values and social discourses that have shaped the adolescents' interpretation of their experiences.

3.2 Methodology - Collaborative inquiry

Collaborative inquiry has been widely used in educational research and, in recent years, has increasingly been adopted in other professional contexts such as social work, psychology, agriculture, and industry. Collaborative inquiry is one of the participatory and action-based inquiry methods that have emerged to improve practice and develop new knowledge (Brooks & Watkins, 1994). It builds on the tradition of action research (Bowling, 1997). Ways of conducting research usually reflect the researchers' epistemological and ontological perspective. In recent decades, the process of developing methods to resolve dilemmas (the epistemological position) has informed new directions for research (Elden & Chisholm, 1993).

Inspired by Heron's (1981, 1985, 1988) notion of co-operative inquiry and Reason's and Rowan's (Reason, 1988b; Reason & Rowan, 1981a) notion of participatory human inquiry, collaborative inquiry represents an evolution in attitudes towards inquiry. It celebrates participation and democracy in the research process (Bray et al., 2000), and a dynamic and negotiated view of reality (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990). It holds that what we take to be reality is the output of the human cognitive processes.

Action research is, in many ways, the precursor of collaborative inquiry. Collaborative inquiry has taken the democratic trend of action research a step further by insisting that those involved in the research process are a "group of peers": "Members may bring a diverse set of skills and experiences to the group, but these are not viewed as the basis for early differentiation. The initiator ... has to quickly concede authority as soon as possible during the inquiry" (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000: 13). The process is participatory: engagement with the community is critical (Anderson & Gehart, 2007; Gehart, Tarragona & Bava, 2007). This co-participation means that "system members must learn how to make sense of their own data in terms of their own language and in relation to their own perception and values" (Elden & Chisholm, 1993: 125).

Action research aims to create "a higher degree of self-determination and self-development capability" (Elden & Chisholm, 1993) and sets itself apart from the elitist assumptions of the traditional laboratory model of experimental research. This new emphasis has the benefit of fostering learning among participants, as well as solving problems and generating valid knowledge. During the course of a study, participants may reinterpret and reconstitute the research methodology itself. It proceeds by constructing meaning around experience, which also can lead to new perspectives that will encourage personal development, create a new context for practice, or shed new light on a problem.

3.2.1 How collaborative inquiry can be used to achieve research objectives

Collaborative inquiry has the potential to give voice to the poor. It can be used as a tool for the co-creation of group knowledge and effecting change through learning (Gehart, Tarragona & Bava, 2007). In contrast to other action-based approaches, collaborative inquiry is a process in which the participants take on the dual role of co-inquirer and object of inquiry (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kalu, 2007).

Since the core resource of collaborative inquiry is the group, the research is based on personal experience rather than external data (Yorks & Kasl, 2002).

This form of inquiry concerns the lived experience of people and strives to achieve meaningful solutions, not just to obtain better explanations. Methodologically, it is not top down. In the present study, I collaborated with adolescents: their own interests are at the centre of the research process. Each inquiry is complex and unique, and relies upon the participants to set the agenda, participate in the data collection, and control the use of outcomes. Even the data collection is an evolutionary process and is not compelled to follow predetermined rules (Winter & Munn-Giddings, 2001).

According to Bray et al. (2000), collaborative inquiry "is a practice of fostering learning that denies that research is a form of learning reserved for specialists" (p. 27). In the process, the researcher is one participant among many who are engaged an inquiry-based learning activity. Collaborating with poor adolescents will enrich the definition of poverty, provide more insight into the causes of poverty, and ensure more accurate and in-depth information. Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Kalu (2007) suggest that the success of collaborative inquiry depends on the quality and degree of the inquirer's self-reflexivity. This is of critical importance to the inquiry process and its internal validity.

3.2.2 Collaborating with adolescents

The knowledge produced by collaborative inquiry is socially constructed and strongly influenced by the context in which it is constructed. Such research does not examine people-in-isolation but people-in-systems. Maxwell (1984) argues that wisdom consists of offering solutions to practical human concerns—theory is secondary and derivative. Knowledge that is important for researchers and co-researchers is "knowledge in action." There are some successful social work researches have adopted a collaborative approach in their studies of poverty (Booth,

1998; Finch, 1984; Northway, 2002). Participants contributed to the analysis by discussing their perceptions of the meaning and experience of poverty.

There is no doubt that, as Jenkins (2004) notes, this process "works with children as much as it does with adults" (p. 58). Young people are quite capable of developing their own ideas and can help to correct any distortions that may arise in the research process (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, 2005). Heron and Reason (2001) maintain that collaboration allows young people to better make sense of their life, develop new and creative ways of looking at things, change things that they might want to change, and find out how to do things better.

3.3 Research design

The research design had to be inherently reflexive and responsive. Since the emphasis was on participation, the adolescents described their situation in the context of group narrations. This section would include research questions for the study, and approaches used to collect and analysis the data.

3.3.1 Research questions

The study not only produces conceptual knowledge through analysing the adolescents' narrations, but also explores social work practices to alleviate the effect of poverty. Therefore, the success of the study depended on exploring questions of significance not only to the social worker but also to the adolescents:

i)   "How do the adolescents make sense of their experiences of the life challenges of poverty, including socio-economic deprivation, difficulties with relationships, and lack of social networks?"— to fill the knowledge gap in our understanding of the adolescents' experience of living in poverty;

ii) "What are the social and cultural factors that influence the adolescents' interpretation of the experience of poverty?"—to identify the social and cultural discourses which shape adolescents' meaning-making; and

iii) "What are the implications of the study for social work knowledge and practice in the local context?"—to identify the implications for the social work practice based on the analysis of the adolescents' experiences of poverty.

3.3.2 Data collection - Group narration

There are two common approaches adopted in qualitative studies: in-depth interviewing (e.g., Ridge, 2002) and case studies (e.g., Sutton et al., 2007). As Ridge (2002:9) points out, the methods of "interviewing and case study could be obscured or leave a child painfully exposed in the shared environment of a group interview." None of the studies discussed in previous chapters adopted a group methodology, but this is an ideal means of drawing out collective experiences and focusing on particular issues. With a group, it is much easier to do away with unequal power relations between the researcher and the children in the inquiry process.

Philosophers have emphasised the contextual construction of meaning: reality is multi-perspectival; truth is grounded in everyday life and social relations; life is a text but thinking is an interpretive act; facts and values are inseparable; and science and all other human activities are value-laden (Ferrier, 1998). Language and words are of meaning construction (Virgil, 2006). The narrative approach to the collaborative process involves "mutual storytelling and restoring as the research proceeds" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990: 4). The story becomes an object of study; it reveals how individuals and groups make sense of events and actions in their lives. Therefore, the narrative becomes an instrument to construct and communicate meaning, and impart knowledge among the group members.

Using the narrative approach in a group format is very valuable because it empowers participants to draw on their collective experiences and allows for the recognition of shared disadvantages (Payne, 2006; Walker, Crawford, & Parker, 2008). Such stories promote certain values and beliefs that can contribute to the construction of individual identities or concepts of community. It also fosters intersubjectivity: it

deals with the shared, reciprocal experiences of the participants whereby the experience of each has an impact on the experience of the others (Trevarthen, 2001).

There were 22 group sessions held for this study. With the consent of the adolescents, the sessions were audiotaped and transcribed. Audiotaping is an effective method of retaining the dialogue during meetings, and providing an ongoing narrative record of the inquiry and a visual record of nonverbal behaviour and movement. Eventually, more than 50 hours of inquiry group proceedings were recorded, and over 950 pages of transcription were produced.

3.3.2.1 Advantages of adopting the group narrative approach

The group narrative approach contributes to persons forming groups to narrate their experiences and thus becomes an important network for promoting change as well. Social constructionism calls for the grounding of knowledge in the context of social interactions (Gergen, 1998). People and groups of people can construct their knowledge. It emphasises the social and cultural nature of narrative discourse. Narrative may also provide insight into decision-making (O'Connor, 1997) and the processes of knowledge transfer (Darwent, 2000). In this study, the group narrative approach offered three significant advantages.

First, the approach focuses on how persons who have formed a group narrate their experiences. Following Mishler's (1986) narrative approach, the study intended to collect and analyse the text from adolescents' narration through the collaborative inquiry process. Due to its open nature, the participants do not require any special skill or knowledge to speak for themselves in their own voices and to share their experiences. It encouraged the adolescents to describe their experiences without fear of judgement and to come to new understandings by sharing their stories with others.

Second, the group narrative approach generates spontaneous questions (Gall & Borg, 2003). The questions primarily came from "in-the-moment experiences": they are usually a means of gaining further understanding of a particular

communication during the inquiry process. The very lack of structure, which allows flexibility in the discussion, encourages questions, which then open new avenues of investigation. Their lives and relationships in the group are shaped by the stories they take on and tell because these confer a sense of meaning and continuity to their experiences (Kelly, 1998; Kelly, 2002)

Third, the approach fosters critical engagement among group members. The communication is not one way: the participants devote time to listening to one another's stories (Kasl, Dechant, & Marsick, 1993). It also included supporting the adolescents' personal growth even when it seemed to be only peripherally related to advancing the inquiry, as well as engaging in 'focused hearing' (Lawrence & Mealman, 1996). They are led to reflect deeply on their experience by asking and answering critical questions, testing assumptions, and offering alternative interpretations.

3.3.3 Data analysis - Thematic narrative analysis

Narrative analysis can be applied to a wide range of texts (Riessman, 1993, 1994). It deals with verbal data—usually stories or accounts of personal experiences (Smith, 2000). According to Riessman (1993), narrative analysis can be categorised as thematic, structural, dialogic, performative, or visual. This study adopted a thematic approach to the analysis of the transcripts collected from the inquiry group. The thematic approach emphasises the content of the text—"what" is said rather than "how" it is said, the "tale" rather than the "telling." The stories that the adolescents told about themselves were constructed and reconstructed through their communication with others. By this means, they all participated in the creation of their social world (Shotter, 1993).

Thematic analysis is similar to grounded theory, but the former keeps the story intact and often uses prior theoretical concepts. Understanding the point of the narrative is more important than language or form. The approach is well suited to the study of subjectivity and identity, largely because of the importance given to

imagination and the human element in constructing a story. For sociologists, narratives reveal much about social life and culture. Hearing how people talk, researchers can analyse how culturally and historically contingent the terms, beliefs, and issues of the narrators are (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992).

Language is a route to meaning and facilitates the process of meaning-making and world-constructing, but "meaning" and "world" are not intrinsic to words or language (Riessman, 2005). Adolescents' views, ideas, and experiences are the central focus of this study. Using language and discourse to describe relevant aspects of an interactional or communicative situation, both the adolescent and the social worker contextualise their experiences, express themselves, strengthen their relationship, and shape their story. Narratives use language and discourse as a way of knowing and communicating (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). During the group sessions for this study, theories were allowed to emerge from the data through multiple cycles of analysis and interim explanations: the process did not begin with a pre-existing set of theoretical propositions.

3.3.3.1 Handling narrative analysis – thematic analysis

Thematic analysis, one of the modes of narrative analysis, focuses on the content of oral and written narrative data. It need not follow step-by-step instructions on how to construct and interpret data; instead, as Riessman (2005) points out, it can adapt according to methodologies and objectives. This study follows Braun and Victoria's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

After creating a text from the transcript, the first step was to become familiar with the data. It took me six months to read and reread the data, noting recurrent patterns. These patterns were used in the next phase—generating initial codes. These codes were based on the patterns and connections I identified both within and between the various narratives. These patterns or connections are important because

they help to explain why certain events occur.

In order to categorise and sort the data, I had to develop a list of key points. Phase three of the analysis involved combining codes so as to establish overarching themes that still accurately reflect the data. To facilitate the task, I mapped out various categories for sorting (see Figure 2). I was careful to be true to the themes that emerged, even when they did not seem to "fit" the pattern. It is also important to bear in mind elements that might be missing from the analysis.

In phase four of Braun and Victoria's (2006) analytic process, the researcher reviews the themes. I departed from their outline, here, and invited the adolescents to review the themes during the group sessions. They would judge whether these themes accurately portrayed their experience of poverty. Through the group narrative approach, the adolescents reviewed, considered, and employed categories to structure their experiences and analyses.

In phase five, I had to determine how to define these themes and categorise them. And, finally, it was necessary to pick the themes that would increase our knowledge of adolescents' experiences of poverty. This resulted in the creation of six categories: living in poverty and happiness/well-being, kinds of poverty, living in poverty and deprivation, no opportunities for consumerism, inability to improve one's situation and worries about future mobility, and lack of family support and guidance. Eventually four of these themes became the focus of our study; they will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.
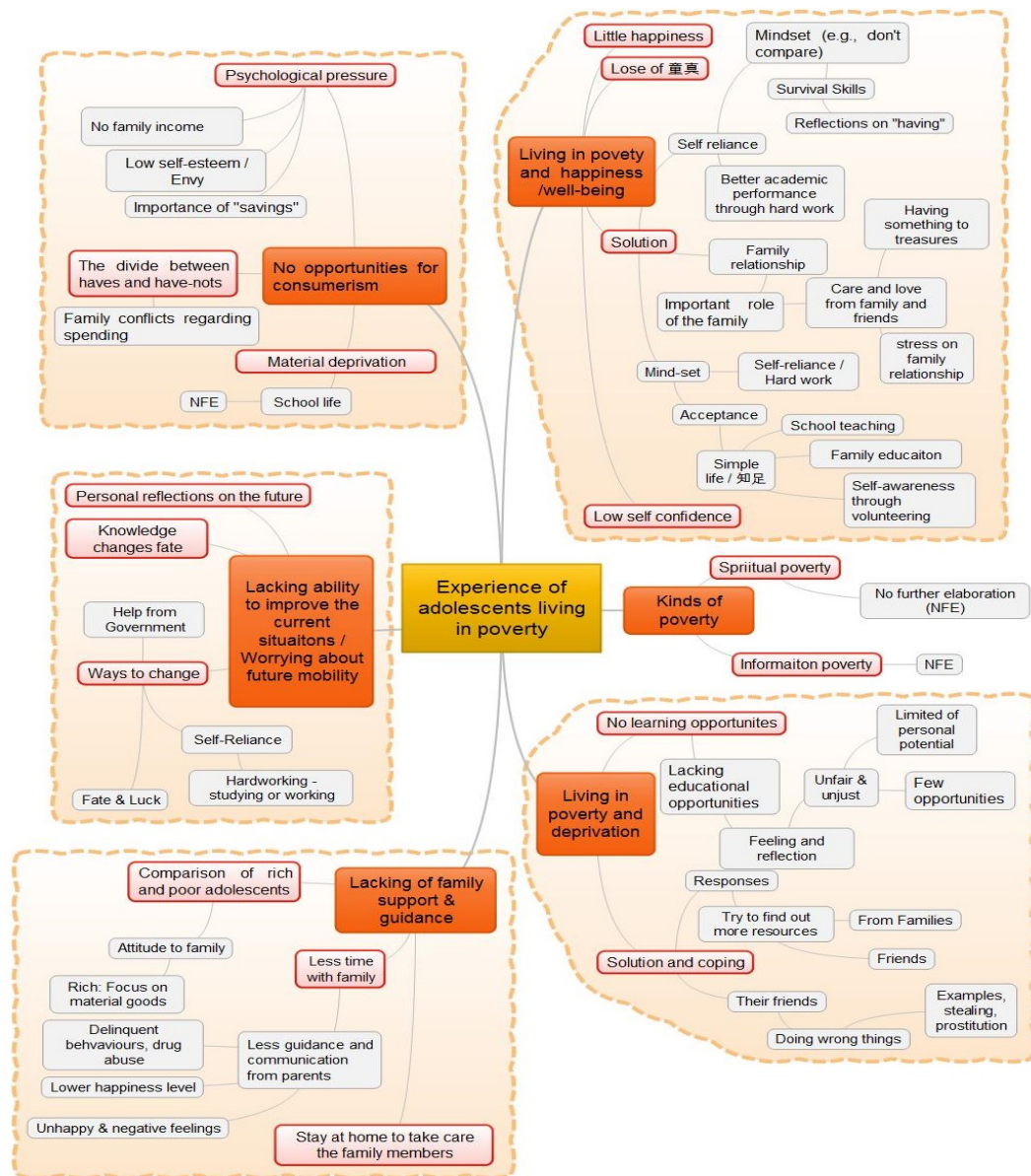
Figure 2: Thematic diagram of the text

3.4 Research Trustworthiness and ethical issues

Most of the conventional validity methods are better suited to quantitative studies than studies based on collaborative inquiry, which relies on people's examination of their own experiences. To establish the validity of any inquiry, one must first identify the threats to its validity and then develop a method for countering

these threats (Bray et al., 2000). The present study has applied measures proposed by Reason and Rowan (1981: 249-250) to increase its validity.

3.4.1 Trustworthiness of collaborative inquiry

3.4.1.1 Avoiding threats to trustworthiness throughout the inquiry process

The validity of the research was much enhanced by the systematic use of feedback loops (Reason, 1994; Bray et al., 2000). The inquiry proceeded in cycles—action was followed by reflection, in which the adolescents confirmed their impressions. With the awareness brought about by reflection, they gained the understanding to reconstruct the meanings of their individual accounts.

For instance, during her description of living in poverty, one of the members of the group, Ching, said, "Living in poverty doesn't always have to be unhappy. If we don't cherish the things we have, I think it will create more problems" (因為生活在貧窮，唔一定唔開心，如果唔珍惜才令到問題產生). The researcher then invited all the group members to share their views on this statement. Their comments expanded and qualified Ching's. Another member, Wai, pointed out that he sometimes felt unhappy due to "the inability of satisfying one's materialistic wants" (不能滿足物質上之需要): "Sometimes I will compare what I don't have with what my friends have and feel so much inferior because of that" (朋友有的東西我沒有，相互比較下感到自卑）.

The study also used triangulation to strengthen the credibility of the findings and reduce bias (Bray et al., 2000). Various sources of data and occasions of data collection were compared in order to provide a multidimensional perspective. For instance, one of the ways poverty was addressed was in a discussion of the experience of buying sneakers. Discussions on various topics relating to poverty were held at all stages throughout the inquiry process, so as to generate a wide range of data to compare.

3.4.1.2 Group and outside forms of validation

Caution must be exercised when researchers and participants are familiar with the research area, and therefore may have a biased or privileged view of the inquiry process (Holliday, 2002). To avoid this problem, I must rely on "making the familiar strange". I carefully neutralized the effect of my own assumptions on poverty by repeatedly examining all themes and categories associated with poverty, and maintaining a critical distance from my existing knowledge. To open up a range of perceptions, I invited the members of the group to share their views on poverty:

> *Wong Kwai Yau: As you propose, I will try to confine the area of discussion of poverty. Are we all interested in discussing this topic?*
> *All members: OK! That's the hot topic now! (好呀!呢個係熱門題目啦!)*
> *WKY: OK! What's the meaning of "poor" to you all? (雖然我講的範圍是與貧窮有關的，首先確定大家有興趣的範圍，貧窮兩個字，你覺得與大家有什麼關係?)*

At the end of the sessions, the adolescents could comment on what they said about their living experiences and life challenges, and could consult with each other to suggest possible solutions. The group's thoughts on the viability of a proposed solution also provided useful feedback. As Lewin notes, "One of the best ways to understand the world is to try to change it" (quoted in Argyris et al., 1985: xii). To combat possible bias and provide a stability check, I reviewed the transcripts and shared my interpretations and analyses with the group. The group reviewed and eventually endorsed all themes and categories that I suggested in my analysis.

3.4.2 Ensuring the ethics of research procedures

3.4.2.1 Obtaining consent and the right to withdraw

It was essential that I obtain the adolescents' consent before they joined the collaborative inquiry group. I explained the purpose of the study clearly to the adolescents and their parents. It was stressed that adolescents would be considered autonomous persons, capable of making choices and giving informed consent (i.e., fully understanding what it meant to participate in the study). Almost all parents and

guardians supported their children's participation. By signing the two-page consent form that I prepared, the adolescents documented their willingness to participate.

3.4.2.2   Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality is integral to the social work profession, and it is important to take all measures to safeguard confidentiality in the field. Also, the identity of the message is unknown and unspecified. Therefore, the participants' anonymity was ensured by the use of pseudonyms in the study. A primary question is, "Who will have access to the data and how will the data be used?" (Wiles, Charles, Crow, & Health, 2006: 287). Before joining the inquiry group, all adolescents agreed that their conversation were recorded. I explained that their input would not appear in the final thesis or any other publication in ways that would threaten their privacy or confidentiality.

3.4.2.3   Addressing power imbalances

Given my dual role as a researcher conducting the study and a social worker dealing with adolescents, I had to address the power imbalances that arise due to adult/child and expert/client power differentials (Christensen & James, 2000; Morrow & Richards, 1996). Measures were put in place to minimize the imbalance. For example, the adolescents were invited, not requested, to join the study, and could withdraw at any time without consequence. From the outset, they were provided with sufficient and necessary background information about the scope of the research and the nature of the study. They were asked to participate in the decisions concerning what to include in the group inquiry process. They were able not only to decide where and when to conduct the sessions but also to raise their concerns and make suggestions at any point throughout the process.

3.5 Formation of the inquiry group

3.5.1 Selecting and recruiting participants

To broaden and enrich the context of the inquiry, the collaborative inquiry group was necessary to find participants from diverse backgrounds (Megan, 2007; Tracy, 2008). The participants represented a range with regard to sex, age, family background, birthplace, family composition, community, and communication and learning styles. To participate in the study one had to meet only two criteria—belonging to a "poor" or "low-income" family and being under the age of 18.

3.5.1.1   The definition of "poor"

The definition of "poor" varies across the globe. According to the Hong Kong government, "poor" or "low-income" families are those covered by the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme or whose total family monthly income is below half of the median monthly family income. Local social work practitioners have adopted this definition. In 2010, low-income families included a family of two with a monthly income below HK$6,000, a family of three or four with a monthly income below HK$8,000, and a family of five or more with a monthly income below HK$10,000 (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2010).

3.5.1.2   Recruitment of adolescents

Using the simple criteria above to define "poor", the study recruited adolescents from poor families to join the inquiry group. Various strategies were employed—open invitations, informal personal invitations, and referrals. Bray et al. (2000) maintains that a group of between five and twelve people is ideal because it can allow for diversity while still functioning democratically and with reasonable efficiency. Twelve adolescents were accepted the invitation to join the group.

These young people, who were between the ages of 11 and 16, were mature enough to live their lives in self-directed and conscious ways. I had contacted their parents and guardians by phone to explain the purposes of the research and the

arrangement of the inquiry sessions. Two young people dropped out before the first session due to other commitments (homework) and time constraints. The inquiry group of 10—three boys and seven girls was in this ideal range.

3.5.1.3 Pilot group

There was no standard procedure to guide the inquiry process and the inquiry cycle of collaborative inquiry. Therefore, I had tested the adopted inquiry strategy with a trial group that also included 10 adolescents before the formation of the inquiry group for the present study. Participants were recruited using the same criteria and methods as the present study. The 12 inquiry sessions were conducted on Monday nights from November 2009 to February 2010.

During the trial, the participants always lost the focus of their research question and the inquiry group direction in the trial stage. Therefore, the group advocated searching a framework to assist their participation. Then, the pilot group tried to use Bray el al.'s (2000) framework in following inquiry sessions (The detailed framework would be discussed in the section 3.6). After the trial, the participants evaluated this framework and agreed it easy to handle and understand. In addition, working with the pilot group taught me a great deal about conducting skills of collaborative inquiry with adolescents and the importance of listening the adolescents' voices of experience in poverty.

3.5.1.4 Setting and schedule of the inquiry group

The open-ended questions of collaborative inquiry emphasise the partnership of social workers and participants. Our sessions were conducted in the activity room of a community-based service centre for adolescents and youth. The members of the group were familiar with the setting, which was close to their homes. The setting provided a separate space where the group was able to distance themselves from outside distraction and interference during the inquiry process. The group sessions began in November 2010 and continued until May 2011. It was agreed that the best time to hold them was in the evenings. Some individual consultation sessions were

also conducted to verify the correctness of the transcripts. These individual sessions also were an opportunity to observe the growing confidence of the participants.

3.5.2 Profile of participants

Name	Sex	Age	Grade	Family status	Household
1.WAI(偉)	M	12	Secondary 1	Low-income family	4 persons Father—worker Mother—housewife Brother—age 14
2.YEUNG (楊)	M	12	Primary 6	CSSA recipients	4 persons Father—watchman Mother—part-time worker Sister—age 10
3.NGA(魏)	M	14	Secondary 2	Low-income family	4 persons Father—abandoned family Mother—part-time worker Grandma—part-time worker
4.FAY(菲)	F	12	Secondary 1	CSSA recipients	4 persons Father—worker Mother—site worker Brother—age 8
5. CHUN (珍)	F	13	Secondary 2	CSSA recipients	3 persons Father—worker in Mainland Aunt—part-time worker
6. FUNG (豐)	F	15	Secondary 4	CSSA recipients *Not born in H.K.	3 persons Mother—part-time worker Brother—age 17
7. YING (英)	F	16	Secondary 4	CSSA recipients *Not born in H. K.	5 persons Father—worker Mother—housewife with part-time job Sister—age 7 Brother—age 10
8. SHU (舒)	F	15	Secondary 3	CSSA recipients	3 persons with Mother – Worker Brother – age 10

Name	Sex	Age	Grade	Family status	Household
9. CHING (清)	F	15	Secondary 4	Low-income family	4 persons Father—labourer Mother—salesperson Sister—age 14
10. WING (穎)	F	14	Secondary 3	Low-income family	3 persons Father—driver Mother—cleaner

Table 1: Profiles of inquiry group participants

1. **Wai**, a 12-year-old boy from a low-income family, was a Form 1 student at a local secondary school. He was living in a public estate in Shatin with his father, mother, and 14-year-old brother. His father had been working in an industrial factory for two years. Before his current employment, he had worked for another company for over 10 years during which time he was regularly deployed to the Mainland China office. With little related work experience and a comparatively low education, Wai's father earned around $8500 month, that is below 50% of the average income for domestic households. Wai's mother was a sales clerk in a clothes shop who resigned from work after becoming pregnant. Wai's elder brother was in Form 4 at another secondary school. Wai was an active participant in the group throughout the inquiry process. He was eager to share his ideas and join the discussion, although sometimes he did not stay on topic.

2. **Yeung**, also a 12-year-old boy, came from a family that has been receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) for 10 years. He was one of the top Primary 6 students in a local school near his apartment. He was living on a public estate with his father, mother, and 10-year-old sister. His father became a night watchman after he was born. Due to their father's working hours, Yeung and his sister seldom saw him during the day. His mother had a demand-based part-time job. In order to earn more money, Yeung's mother scavenged for cardboard boxes and plastic bottles, and sold them to recycling shops. The monthly income of Yeung's family was around $9000, with $6500 from work

and about $2500 from CSSA. Yeung's younger sister was in Primary 4 at the local school he attended. Yeung's appearance was always cute and nice; his dress, simple and tidy. He spoke quietly because he felt nervous and shy when talking in a group setting. He expressed his love for his family and clearly enjoyed his life with them.

3. **Nga,** a 14-year old boy, came from a low-income family.   It was a single-parent family since the father had abandoned them more than a decade before. The family was living in a middle-sized flat in a Shatin public housing estate. Because of her work, Nga's mother did not live with him, but he met with her two or three times a week. He lived with his grandmother, who was closer to him than his mother. Nga really appreciated what his grandma had done for him. She worked part-time cleaning offices during the week and took care of Nga in her time off. As she was over 60 years old, Nga often relied on himself and sometimes provided care for her. A Secondary 2 student in a local school, Nga told us that his academic performance was unsatisfactory and he had no interest in studying. He planned to find a job after the completion of secondary school. Nga was talkative and expressive, sometimes challenging but still kind and polite. His appearance was fashionable and bright.

4. **Fay**, a 12-year-old girl, came from a family who had been receiving CSSA for six years. They were living in a 30 m^2 flat in a public housing estate. Fay's parents worked long hours outside the home, so most of the time Fay had to take care of herself and her eight-year-old brother. If Fay had to attend extracurricular activities or after-school social gatherings, her brother had to go home alone. The siblings were very close. Fay did not complain even in such difficult circumstances: instead, she was understanding and positive about her family arrangements.   Fay was a very active student in Secondary 2 and popular among her peers. When she was free from family obligations, she would be eager to socialize. Fay was talkative, optimistic, and ready to share with others. She was one of the most frequent attendees in the group and adapted to the group inquiry

and discussion very well. Fay's committed and supportive attitude manifested itself in her smiling face every day.

5. **Chun** was a 13-year-old girl who had received individual CSSA for five years. Chun and her aunt were renting a flat in a private housing estate. She had lived with her aunt for eight years, since her parents were divorced. In Chun's early childhood, her father worked in Mainland China and only returned once or twice a year. Her mother left home 10 years earlier after Chun's father had an extramarital affair. Chun had lost all contact with her five years earlier. Due to her aunt's financial problems, Chun was compelled to apply for CSSA. Her aunt then became her guardian. Chun was only an average Secondary Form 2 student, though she studied diligently. She deeply felt the lack of familial support for her studies. Chun was gentle and rational. Due to her complicated family background, she would become silent when the group was talking about any issues related to family or parents. On any other topic, however, Chun actively shared her life experiences with the group.

6. **Fung,** a 14-year-old girl, came from a family that had been receiving CSSA for 10 years. Her family lived in a flat in a public housing estate. Born in Mainland China, Fung migrated to Hong Kong with her mother and her elder brother when she was two years old. Her father had married her mother in the 1990s in Mainland China. Marriages between residents of Mainland China and Hong Kong were very common in the 1980s and 90s. When her father had died, the family lost its breadwinner and were compelled to receive CSSA. Her mother was a full-time housewife and caregiver until Fung entered secondary school, at which time she took a part-time job. Her mother was anxious to cease their dependency on CSSA. Fung was a Secondary 2 student who enjoyed school life. She was hard-working and her academic performance was satisfactory. She had a strong desire to pursue higher education. As a result, her education was a high priority and she could not join all the group sessions due to academic demands.

Chun always raised insightful questions in the group and was willing to share her thoughtful questions.

7. **Ying,** a 15-year-old girl, came from a family who had received CSSA for 10 years. Her family lived in a medium-sized flat on a public housing estate. Ying's father lost his highly paid job when his company closed down business in Mainland China. When he returned to Hong Kong, he could only find a poorly paid work as his experience and seniority were not recognized. Ying experienced the family's drastic change of fortune, which continued to influence their living conditions. As the eldest child of the family, Ying felt responsible to improve her family's living conditions. She was an industrious Secondary 4 student who attended additional tutoring sessions and did extensive revision. Ying's mother had a part-time job and was responsible for all the housework as well as taking care of the family. At the group sessions, Ying spoke little but was always present. Ying sometime saw herself as one who could give the group an outsider's perspective.

8. **Shu,** a 15-year-old girl, came from a single-parent family who had received CSSA for seven years. Her family was living in a 25 m^2 rented flat. Her activities had been limited because she had to look after her chronically ill father, who had died of cancer four earlier. Her family members had rallied after his death. Her mother worked as a restaurant cashier and applied for CSSA for additional support. Shu thought her current conditions were fair and did not complain. She was a student in Secondary 3 and her school performance was good. Well-behaved and gentle, she impressed her teachers and was elected class monitor and chairperson of the music club. She loved to play the violin and planned to be a violinist in the future. She always shared her school life with others in the group sessions. Shu was positive and kind. Her narration in the group was supportive and rational. She did not argue with others and preferred to follow the group.

9.   **Ching** was a 15-year-old girl who was always smiling. She came from a low-income family and was a Secondary 3 student at a neighbourhood school. She lived with her parents and younger sister, a Primary 6 student, on a public housing estate. Ching's father was a construction worker with a sporadic income. During the past few years, her father had worked less than 10 days per month. Her mother was a full-time sales clerk for a street merchant. Ching's family met the criteria for CSSA, but her parents insisted on relying on themselves. During the day, Ching was responsible for taking care of her younger sister, which she did thoughtfully and willingly. She spent a lot of her time teaching her younger sister so that she would succeed academically. Ching was a hard-working student, although she did not believe education would improve her family's living conditions.

10. **Wing,** a 14-year-old girl, was the only child in a low-income family. She was a Secondary 3 student at a government school far from her neighbourhood. The family rented a small flat in a private housing estate. His father was a bus driver, and her mother was a cleaner. Wing said that, as an only child, she was relied upon to help raise her family's standard of living. The total income from both parents' jobs was less than $13000, but they had to pay more than $5000 rent every month. Their daily spending budget was very tight. Wing seldom joined in social gatherings with her friends or attended extra classes. Although Wing considered herself to be taciturn and unsociable, she spoke well and was eager to join in group discussions. Her health was not good, which led to poor attendance at school. She also missed four group sessions due to illness. Still, her attitude was positive and assiduous.

3.6 Description of collaborative inquiry process

The inquiry process provided an opportunity for the adolescents to describe their experience of poverty and their life challenges. As Brady et al. (2000) notes, collaborative inquiry is a cyclical process; information is shared and then recurs in new contexts. Based on the suggestion from the pilot group, we adopted Bray el al.'s

(2000) framework to develop a guide in deciding how to proceed in the inquiry process (see Figure 3).
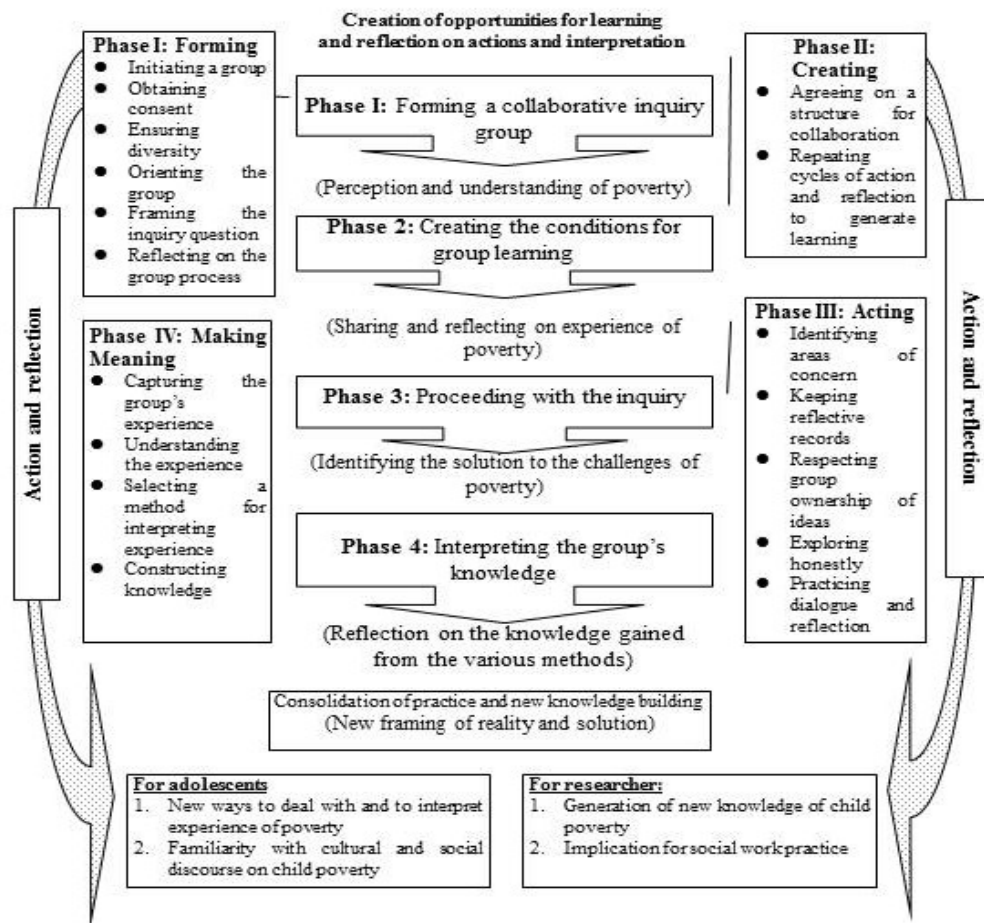
Figure 3: Inquiry process

Because of its flexible nature, the inquiry was not rigid and did not follow predetermined stages. During the inquiry process, we went through the cycle of action and reflection repeatedly. Schon (1983) describes the inquiry process as reflecting-in-action while in the process of accomplishing certain tasks. The members of the group engaged in this process, gained new insights, and discovered new ways to address their problems. This dialectical process encouraged the adolescents to confirm and question various observations. It also helped them to determine how much could or could not be learned from the experiences. At the

same time, I gained a great deal of practical knowledge that could be usefully applied to local social work interventions.

3.6.1 Forming a collaborative inquiry group

The first task of the collaborative inquiry group was to interest the adolescents in the project. In preparation, I conducted an orientation workshop to introduce them to the purpose of the study and its methodology. Such the workshop was suggested by the participants in the pilot project. The adolescents puzzled about the process of collaborative inquiry. For instance, many were surprised that they did not need to fill out a questionnaire for the study. I said, "The project does not require you administering a questionnaire. Instead, you all collaborate with me to investigate any topic related to poverty. Please feel free to share and listen …"(呢個研究就唔係純粹你地填問卷，因為我地呢個研究計劃好需要大家嘅參與，你將你地嘅內心真心嘅野，一齊講出嚟俾大家聽...).

The orientation meeting was important to clarify my role. I explained to the adolescents about the nature of collaborative inquiry, their role as co-researchers, and the expectation of their active participation and involvement in the design and management of the inquiry, and even in ensuring its conclusions and information were accurate. We then discussed data collection methods and the reasons for audiotaping and transcribing our sessions. When the adolescents were told that they would share their own stories, they could look forward to comparing their experiences and developing new insights. The group would experience a "cognitive breakthrough" into the following inquiry process

3.6.2 Creating the conditions for group learning

Early on in the process, a trusting relationship was established within the group, which created favourable conditions for adolescents' involvements. Heron and Reason (2001) describe the relationship between social workers and participants in a study as collaboration. The goal of total collaboration was expected to maintain

through each step of the inquiry process. Therefore, I had to create a relaxed climate among the members so they would be encouraged to share their stories.

Riessman (2007) notes that the main task of the researcher involved in a collaborative inquiry is to facilitate participants' narrations. Early on, Yeung described his experience of buying a pair of sneakers. The other members could empathize with Yeung's experience and soon were sharing their stories about the challenges of living in poverty. I expressed support and appreciation to the adolescents who took initiative and open-minded to voices out their experience in the group.

Since these adolescents had little or no experience of commenting and reflecting on their lives in the group setting, I encouraged them to say whatever came into their minds. They could direct the discussion, choose the themes, and agree on a structure. Together we prepared a list of topics that would be the basis of a brainstorming session. Discussion topics included "being poor, not necessarily unhappy" (貧窮並不一定是唔開心!), and "the ways to resist material temptations" (面對生活在貧窮下，怎樣可以抗衡物質引誘).

Even the adolescents who, in the early stages, preferred to observe rather than participate in the group discussion eventually began to take the initiative. The listening process itself was not passive: the group was constantly having to feedback how others' experiences of poverty compared with their own. The group quickly took on the role of co-inquirers, collaborating on the meaning of their experience. The differences among the group members were an advantage because they brought a diversity of life experiences to the inquiry process.

3.6.3 Action on the inquiry

The inquiry process was fluid and experience-driven, relying on the momentum of the members. There would be very difficult, and also unnecessary, to

try to differentiate one phase of the inquiry from another. The purpose of a collaborative inquiry is to generate valid new knowledge and meanings through cycles of action and reflection. After the previous inquiry sessions, the adolescents adjusted well to the group atmosphere.

During the inquiry process, I was careful not to assume a leading, or even facilitating role: group members took the initiative, set the tempo of the group, and started the discussions. As Reason (1994) observes, it is the dialectical tension between action and reflection that keeps the process of collaborative inquiry in motion. Sometimes this more nuanced approach was difficult for the members to grasp:

> *WKY: Let's start our discussion now. I'm one of the group members like you all in the inquiry group. Don't expect me to lead the discussion and the group. (讓我們一起開始討論，我跟大家一樣也是小組的成員…不應期望我會領導小組作討論)*
> *Nga: Wong Sir, please show me how to lead? (黃SIR，你可否示範如何帶領大家討論？)*

Even so, I was able to observe increasing ownership and participation among the adolescents in the inquiry group. They began sharing more complicated feelings, viewpoints, and coping strategies. One discussion revolved around means of coping with the desire for material goods. Most agreed that self-discipline was necessary: one must "not think about luxurious items" (唔去想諗啲貴物品) or "buy cheaper goods" (改買一些平啲的物品). As the discussion continued, their analysis deepened. They realized that resisting the desire for material goods had become value-laden—it was a good thing to do: "my family teaches me to have simple lifestyle" (屋企人教我生活簡單/樸實); "my friends, parents, or teachers persuade me not to buy 'luxury' goods" (有啲啲朋友，家長及老師游說自己唔好買奢侈品).

At the heart of collaborative inquiry is the assumption that learning resides in the experience of the inquirers. In such ways, the group members took turns leading

the group discussion, which increased their sense of ownership in the project, and broadened their understanding. All adolescents were engaged in the inquiry sessions and were able to better understand and make deep reflection from their own experiences. Different topics were explored and developed throughout the inquiry process.

3.6.4 Constructing meanings from the experience of poverty

During its final sessions, the group focused on constructing meanings from their experiences. Of course, such activity was not confined to one stage of the inquiry process. Throughout the process, the adolescents and I would scan the grounds for their opinions and construct their collective reflective thinking about their lived experience and life situations of poverty (Mezirow, 1991). Ching worried about the possibility of bias and distortion, but Nga countered, "Does this mean we need to start all over again? I assumed we had come to a conclusion!" (是否我們要由開始再傾過？我以為我地已經定左總結。). The group took different exercises to ensure that their conclusions would be accurate and valid, for instances, systematic use of feedback loops and repetition throughout the inquiry process.

During the course of the inquiry process, the adolescents' understanding of their experiences and of the nature of poverty changed. At the outset, many thought that the course of their lives was beyond their control. They reconstructed their interpretation of poverty and viewed it from a larger context.. Towards the end of the inquiry, Ying commented, "I don't know whether my thinking is valid… my experience is only mine... I never know about the others before" (我唔知道我所想的是否有效/確實… 我只知道我自己生生活經驗是甚麼，根本沒有機會知道其他人). The inquiry process really helped individual members to reflect on their lives and develop their own understanding and practical strategies in living of poverty.

3.7 Consolidation of practice and knowledge

Although the group members could not change their living conditions right away, they formulated strategies to cope with their daily challenges, such as self-reliance and the suppression of personal needs. While they did not completely solve their problems, they realized that they had bravely struggled with the challenges that accompanied poverty. The study drew attention to subjects that had not been covered in the literature on adolescents' experience of poverty in Hong Kong, including adolescent relationships, developmental challenges, and the influence of the embedded local social and cultural discourse of their experiences. Both Gilligan's theory of the relational dilemma (1982) and the Kegan's theory of the mental burden (1994) have application here. The adolescents were torn between the values of their parents and those of their peers. They also often felt unable to cope with social expectations of extra developmental burdens from their daily lives. In addition, it became clear that Chinese cultural values such as Confucianism had shaped the group members' interpretation of poverty.
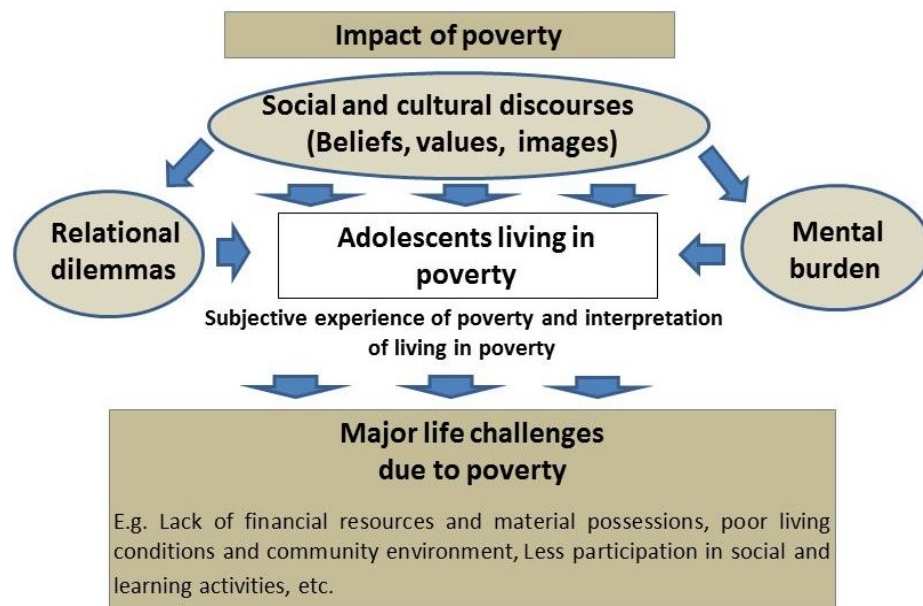
Figure 4: Proposed conceptualization of adolescents' experience of poverty

3.7.1 Socio-cultural factors shaping the interpretation of the experience of poverty

As Gergen (2009) points out, the prevailing discourse determines one's view of reality. It was necessary, therefore, to determine how social and cultural discourses had influenced the adolescents' understanding. The narrative approach used in this study is particularly well-suited to capturing the nuances of cultural influences. On many occasions, the members of the group emphasised the importance of family harmony in their lives, the influence of peers on their consumption, and the self-reliance necessary to cope with daily problems. The tradition of Confucianism was evident in their constructions. Social constructionism maintains that human memory is a discursive artefact (Gergen, 1994).

This study reveals that adolescents think and act in socio-culturally prescribed ways. In a consumer culture, adolescents strongly believe in pursuing material desires. The members of the inquiry group considered certain status symbols as essential as the daily requirements of food and shelter due to peer pressure. The cultural value attached to self-reliance is also important: the adolescents saw earning money through employment as their way out of poverty. They also held the traditional cultural belief in the ability to escape poverty through education. The effect of these socio-cultural values on Hong Kong adolescents' interpreting experience of poverty is a subject that has received very little scholarly attention.

3.7.2 Relational dilemmas with families and peers

During the inquiry, the adolescents were able to re-evaluate their needs and determine which topics they wanted to address. The narration often turned to the moral conflicts and choices they had faced in their relationships with their families and peers. Gilligan (1992) uses the term "psychological logic" to refer to the importance of responsiveness in relationships and the cost of losing connection with oneself or others. Certainly, the adolescents' self-perceptions were closely connected to, and interdependent with, others. They could become agent of change by making

personal choices and resisting conformity to social expectations (Gilligan, 1982). Still, they were reluctant to disagree with those close to them, preferring to maintain a harmonious relationship.

Some of the adolescents' narratives deal with what Gilligan (1982) calls "relational dilemmas." During one session, the younger members of the group described their feelings of inferiority due to their lack of certain material goods. The other group members told them that they should not pursue happiness through material possessions. After this exchange, the younger members were more reluctant to challenge the rest of the group because they wanted, above all, to maintain a harmonious relationship. All the adolescents were involved in relationships where they felt isolated because they were afraid to risk the possibility of conflict. When they expressed their real feelings, they could not necessarily control the consequences.

3.7.3 Bearing additional burdens of poverty

In general, the public's concern for young people who are living in poverty is focused on their daily hardships and socio-economic deprivations. Little attention has been paid to what Kegan (1994) refers to as their "mental burden"—the daily demands and expectations that they are forced to meet. These mental burdens may be beyond their capacity to deal with alone. Parents and adults are supposed to nurture young people and offer them support. In the case of the poor adolescents in our study, however, the sacrifice was made by the youth: they had to give up their own social and educational opportunities to shoulder family responsibilities such as housework and caregiving.

The current study amplified adolescents' voices on bearing extra demands and expectation. These expectations that these adolescents were required to meet often demanded a level of maturity, intelligence, and skill that they had not acquired. They were unable to fulfil the "curriculum" imposed by society. The Kegan's

framework of the mental burden (1994) provided a new dimension of local understanding how adolescents making sense of their experiences in poverty.

3.8 Summary of the chapter

This study adopted a collaborative inquiry approach to address three issues: adolescents' understanding of their experience of poverty, the cultural and social factors that affect that experience, and the implications of these findings for social work practice. Kemmis (1980) notes that collaborative inquiry can both build up theoretical knowledge and further improve practice.

Very few Hong Kong studies have been based on collaborative inquiry. With no a standard procedure in place to guide the inquiry process, we adopted Bray et al.'s (2000) four phases of inquiry: forming, creating, acting, and meaning making. The narrative approach was adopted to capture previously unstudied aspects of the adolescents' experience. Riessman (1993) maintains that thematic narrative analysis deconstructs and reconstructs the adolescents' subjectivities, social objects, and lived experience in poverty. The Braun and Victoria's (2006) six phases of analysis was used to perform the thematic analysis. For avoiding of bias in data-interpretation and analysis, the final versions of the themes, subcategories, and descriptions were reviewed and endorsed by group members.

Throughout the inquiry process, the adolescents were encouraged to move from silent passivity to articulate action. The group inquiry process helped them to conceptualize their challenges and struggles, and the effects of social and cultural expectations. Taking a social constructionist approach (Gergen, 1991), and borrowing from Gilligan's work on relational dilemmas and Kegan's theory of the mental burden, the study probed previously unstudied areas in the experience of Hong Kong youth living in poverty, including their problematic relationships and extra responsibilities. The followings four chapters will adopt the perspective outlined here to examine specific themes in the group narratives.

Chapter 4: Experiencing happiness in spite of poverty

4.1 Introduction

The Western qualitative studies present a vivid picture of the negative effects of poverty on young people (Elliott & Leonard, 2004; Roker, 1998; Willow, 2001; Ridge, 2002, 2006, 2007). In the past decade, Hong Kong scholars have conducted similar studies so as to increase the effectiveness of interventions (BGCA, 2004, 2007). The current study focuses on an area that has yet to be adequately addressed: young people's own perceptions of their situation. In the early sessions of the inquiry group, the adolescents spoke of their pursuit of happiness in the midst of struggling with poverty. Some confessed that they often felt frustrated and inferior. Still, throughout their narratives, it was clear that the group managed to sustain a positive mind set: living in poverty was not considered to be "not good" or "not happy," even though they suffered from many deprivations.

The adolescents recognized that it was virtually impossible to change their living conditions immediately. Instead of focusing on material deprivation, however, they described other sources of happiness such as family relationships and friendships. They had learned to remain silent regarding their sense of deprivation in order to avoid contention with family members (Gilligan, 1991). They had learned that treasuring what they had helped to maintain harmonious family relationships. Materialism and hedonism are not the only paths to happiness. Telling their stories, the adolescents dwelt on other methods to pursue happiness.

Through the social construction process, the adolescents together unfolded their stories of about how they evaluated and understood their living situation in poverty. In this chapter, I will briefly outline some of the current research on the relationship between poverty and happiness. This will be followed by a thematic analysis of the group narratives that chart the adolescents' experiences of that relationship. This

analysis will take into account the psychosocial expectations that accompany poverty, and the influence of social and cultural beliefs and values.

4.2 **Poverty and happiness**

Many factors affect the well-being of youth: finances, health and safety, education, family and peer relationships, vulnerability, and subjective well-being (UNICEF, 2007). The current emphases on materialism, hedonism, and economic status have influenced our attitudes towards the nature of happiness. There is a large amount of literature on determinants of subjective well-being and happiness (Deaton, 2008; Betsey & Wolfers, 2008). These studies show that individuals with higher incomes also have a higher—though not a strikingly higher—sense of subjective well-being (Diener, Eunkook, Robert, & Heidi, 1999). We have referred to some qualitative studies (Roker, 1998; Ridge, 2002, 2007) that show children can be unhappy as a result of the deprivation of material possessions. A recent empirical study conducted by Li, Liu, Ye, and Zhang (2014) also examined the effects of income on happiness and found that the rich did feel happier than the poor. Layard (2005) believes that people compare incomes within their reference group (i.e., people with similar levels of income and status).

Quantitative studies have found that poor children feel distressed, pessimistic, and negative in their daily lives (BGCAHK, 2004, 2007; Crowley & Vulliamy, 2007; Roker, 1998; Willow, 2001; Ridge, 2002, 2007; Elliott & Leonard, 2004). Similarly, qualitative studies portray poor children as unsatisfied with their monetary resources, learning opportunities, and living space (HKU & SoCo, 2002). It may be, however, that the methodology adopted in these studies did not allow children to share their feelings, opinions, and comments about their actual experiences. Subjective well-being is a personal assessment and captures both beneficial and adverse life experiences (Eisdorfer, 1981). It is necessary, then, to discover the subjective views and feelings of young people living in poverty in order to provide them with the most appropriate support.

4.3 The adolescents' view that their life is "not bad" despite poverty

The first life challenge the group members discussed was the struggle to achieve a sense of happiness. The pursuit of happiness was a high priority for all in the group. In their narratives, they struggled to express their views of happiness and described the creative ways they had found to pursue it.

4.3.1 A challenging lifestyle, but not necessarily bad

Although the adolescents were living in pinched circumstances and often felt hopeless, they still thought that being poor was "not necessarily bad." The fact that they were not able to purchase expensive items was not a determining factor of their happiness. Despite their far from optimal living conditions, they focused on non-materialistic sources of happiness. When Fay was asked about her sense of deprivation, she replied, "I don't think poverty is necessarily a bad thing" (我覺得貧窮，唔係一定唔好嘅事). The statement suggests she was reconciled to a degree of financial deprivation. She chose to value what she had—strong familial bonds and connections—instead of what she lacked:

> FAY: I don't think poverty is necessarily a bad thing; perhaps it just means that we are perceived as having far fewer financial resources than wealthy people. We are poor, but we possess many things too. People with a great amount of wealth may consider money quite important, but they may leave family, relationships, and friends out of the picture. However, everything seems worthwhile and charitable in poverty. It's not solely about money. For example, one of the differences between the poor and the wealthy is that what the poor possess and value the most is family relationships and friendship. Wealthy people's lives are driven by moneymaking: they spend most of their time earning more money instead of being with their family. It's different when you are poor. Everyone is short of money, so we all value family the most and focus more on family relationships. (我覺得貧窮，唔係一定唔好嘅事，只不過一般人著眼我地金錢能力，唔同有錢人一樣，相差好

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遠；但我們貧窮都擁有好多野，有錢人可能覺得錢好重要，家人，親情及朋友都不重要;但貧窮中，都會都有值得所擁有，唔係只是錢係第一，例如:你所擁有與有錢人唔同是親情、友情。因為有錢人只係掛住出去做野搵錢，唔係好理到屋企人；貧窮就唔係咁，因為大家都窮，所以大家一家人更會重視親情。)

WKY: *Would you please say more about that? I would like to listen to your experience!* (講多啲先，我想聽下你啲經歷先!)

FAY: *We live in poverty, but it isn't necessarily a bad thing. What matters the most is whether you are happy, right? I think the first important thing is not to covet what others have. It is not necessary to own what other people own. The second is to be satisfied and content with what we already have, such as family living together… Poverty isn't necessarily bad; there can still be things to be happy about.* (我地生活係窮，但唔一定唔好，睇下你點係貧窮之中搵生活得開心點，是嗎!我認為第一樣野係「不要睇人地擁有什麼，我都擁有什麼呢!」第二樣野就係「將擁有」看成值得開心野，例如:親情，一齊生活的野囉…貧窮唔一定係慘，仲有可以開心的地方!)

Fay's observation that "poverty is not necessarily a bad thing" represents her interpretation of her experiences. "Not necessarily a bad thing" suggests optimism in the face of challenges. There were two maxims: the one was 'not to covet what others have' (不要睇人地擁有什麼，我都擁有什麼呢!) and another one was 'to be satisfied with what we've already had, such as family living together' (將擁有」看成值得開心野，例如:親情，一齊生活的野囉). Under the influence of capitalism, happiness and personal success are commonly measured in monetary terms. Referring to the Gilligan's (1982) theory of relational dilemma, Fay would experience poverty with insufficient resources, yet she did not complain to her family about the things she lacked: she was more committed to sustaining a harmonious family relationship than to finding happiness in external objects.

Again, Fay suggested that the poor should find a different set of values. Her narrations were not unique to her own situation but applicable to all who live in poverty. She wanted to deconstruct not only the myths about people who live in

poverty but also the myths about the vastly improved lives of the rich. Fay's story set up a stark contrast between the rich and the poor—the former value material things above all else, while the latter treasure family relationships:

> *YEUNG: Poverty can be a status. When other people are using iPhones or some other new technology products, I initially feel inferior. But then I tell myself to think about how I can avoid being unhappy for not having things like the iPhone. (貧窮可能係一種狀態，其他人有 IPhone，新科技產品，我冇會也初時覺得好自卑!但我會去諗…點樣可以避免自己"冇"會唔開心!)*
>
> *YING: I think poverty refers to a person's starting point. We were all children, but some could afford to learn and buy what they wanted because they had money. Although we did not have the same financial resources, we would work harder than those who were born wealthy. Also, unlike the wealthy who had access to more opportunities, we would cherish every opportunity we had. (我覺得窮會就代表「起步點」的問題，大家都係小朋友，但有些人有錢，可以自己鍾意學嘅野，買嘅野，但我地冇能力(金錢/消費)，我地就會比起有錢人更努力，更會珍惜；不似有錢人，佢地的機會可以用錢買到呀)!*

The group, however, was not willing to overlook some of the deprivations associated with poverty. Some of the junior members recognized the negativity of living in poverty from the dialogue. Yeung's view of poverty as "status" (貧窮可能係一種狀態) and Ying's notion of it as a "starting point" (起步點) suggested a recognition of their deprivation and the difficulties of changing their situation. Still, they believed they had the power to determine their happiness: Yeung, by passively avoiding feeling "unhappy" (點樣可以避免自己"冇"會唔開心!) and Ying by grasping "every opportunity" (更會珍惜).

> *WING: We have fewer opportunities than others and we live in less desirable circumstances. We will cherish every single opportunity. As I've said, we will fight for more opportunities and we are more appreciative of the opportunities that have been presented to us. (生活在沒有更好生活情況*

下，機會相對少，我們會更珍惜機會，是想講，我們會爭取機會及會珍惜擁有的機會。)

CHING: *Living in poverty doesn't necessarily always mean unhappiness. If we don't cherish the things we have, I think it will cause more problems within the family and provoke more arguments among family members. If you are thoughtful and considerate, you will work hard to bring in more income to help out. However, some people ask for money from the family for material satisfactions.... Poverty can drive people to conduct evil deeds, for example, to get more money, people would fight, steal, rob, and sometimes bully: poor teen's group together to bully rich teens.* (因為生活在貧窮，唔一定唔開心，如果唔珍惜，我覺得家庭問題會出現更多問題，與屋企人爭論也會多，如你識思考，會幫補家計；但有些人會因為物質享受多啲，會問家人取錢，再加上學校活動，會有多了家人之間爭執；而且貧窮問題，就想自己得到一樣野，想爭取到，要偷，要搶，有些會有欺凌情況，貧窮少年夾份蝦有錢仔...)

In addition, the members of the group did complain about a certain degree of unfairness and constraint in their daily lives, especially because they were not able to satisfy their social and educational desires. In the current system, the adolescents received only the basic education at school, which did not prepare them for the stiff competition for further studies. The group was eager for extra learning opportunities so they could improve their academic performance. Wing observed, "We have fewer opportunities living in less desirable circumstances..." (生活在沒有更好生活情況下，機會相對少...), but vowed to "fight for more opportunities and … cherish more of the opportunities that are presented to us" (我們會爭取機會及會珍惜擁有的機會). Ching pointed out, "If we don't cherish the things we have, I think it will cause more problems within the family and provoke more arguments among family members. If you are thoughtful and considerate, you will work hard to bring in more income to help out. However, some people ask money from the family for material enjoyment. Together with the demands of school activities, this leads to more conflicts among family members …" (如果唔珍惜，我覺得家庭問題會出現更多問題，與屋企人爭論也會多，如你識思考，會幫補家計；但有些人會因為物質享受多啲，會問家人取錢，再加上學校活動，會有多了家人之間爭執...).

Through the collaborative process, however, the adolescent co-constructed the means to achieve happiness. They concluded that focusing on deprivation only makes them feel unhappy. Instead, they should focus on treasuring what they have and maintaining good family relationships: with such an attitude, the experience of poverty is "not necessarily bad."

4.3.2 Treasuring what one has: A key component of happiness

Unlike their peers, the adolescents were constructing the concept of 'treasuring' to be a key element to make living happy. The group spent a great deal of time discussing the means available to them to achieve happiness:

> FUNG: *When my rich classmates drop their phone on the floor, they don't want the phone anymore and get a new one immediately. If that were me, I would not throw away the old phone. If it were broken, I would take it to the repairman instead of throwing it away…. I cherish all my possessions.* (有個有錢同學，佢個電話只係掉左落地一下，佢就即刻唔要換機；如是係我，我就不會立即掉左去，如真係壞左我會試下修理先，不會即刻掉左去，…我地就會更加珍惜物質野…)
>
> WAI: *I think a lot of young people values material stuff more than they should. It's common to envy people who can afford luxurious stuff. So some poor people feel ashamed when they don't have this stuff.* (我覺得青年人太注重物質，當然睇到人用名貴野，會好羨慕，所以有啲窮人認為冇呢啲名牌野會好冇「面子」…)

The group members mentioned that they could still be happy by 'treasuring what they had' even though they were suffering from financial deprivation or lack of tangible possessions. The group further elaborated the meaning of 'treasuring what you had'(珍惜) which implied treasuring matters that might not be monetary or tangible. Fung did not appreciate her classmates' decision to discard their cell phones casually. She would be prepared to fix the problem rather than ignore it: she would take the phone to a repairman. Treasuring and maintaining one's possessions became

ways of showing the adolescents' coping skills. Wai was also critical of society's focus on acquisitions and status symbols. He argued that people have been deceived by a myth that psychological satisfaction and the Chinese value of "Mian Zi" (face work,面子) can be guaranteed by luxurious goods. He professed that he was not envious of those who had more than him. Other group members also mentioned that their situation had honed their coping skills:

> NGA: Some people think that money can do anything, but I don't think being rich is always good. Some of my wealthy classmates don't know how to use a broom to sweep the floor. Although our circumstances are less favourable, we might know more stuff than they do. (啲人就話錢係萬能嘅，但我覺得錢不一定係好，個啲有錢同學，掃把點執都唔識...雖然我地環境冇咁好，但我地識的野可能比起佢地更加多....)
>
> SHU: I don't think being poor is necessarily bad. At least we have demonstrated our survival skills and our living skills. Mr. Michael Tien was in the Rich Mate/Poor Mate show produced by RTHK. He was at the customer service counter, in front of the camera, asking when the first train departed from the station. He was holding cash in his hand, but did not even know how to purchase tickets from the self-serve machine... We all know that how to purchase a one way ticket—you have to press the station's button.... (我覺我窮唔一定唔好，比人知道我們有生存能力，生活技巧;上次可能係香港電台「窮富翁大作戰」，提到田北晨...他問港鐵櫃台...田北晨手持錢，唔識買飛，點樣入錢...你們都知道，坐地鐵係要按咩站...)

The survival skills and adaptability valued by Nga and Shu had been gained from living in poverty. The group disagreed with the notion that "money can buy anything" (錢係萬能). The non-materialistic means also gave them a sense of happiness. The adolescents co-constructed a reality that challenged the capitalist assumption that money is paramount. Most importantly, they experienced the positive aspects of living in poverty. Although they had little money, they were proud of themselves and this gave them a sense of privilege. For instance, they did not have the same access to resources as the rich, but they had honed practical skills that were even more valuable.

The adolescents in the group actively constructed their living experience in a positive way. At the beginning of the group, Fay tried to introduce the maxim of 'not to covet everything that others have', which could secure them to pursue happiness even they living in poverty. The quality they described as "treasuring" could also be described less positively as "frugality." This quality is highly valued among lower-income Chinese families in Hong Kong. As Gilligan (1982) observes, the adolescents preferred to meet their parents' expectations, to treasure what they had and not demand new things; in such a way, they contributed to harmony within their family.

4.3.3 Family relationships as a safeguard of happiness

The adolescents narrated in the inquiry group and often attributed their happiness to the security offered by family relationships. Ching was critical of a friend who deceived her family to make money:

> *CHING: I have something to add about how post-90s youth deal with the problem of poverty. I recently heard from a friend who started working as a paid escort to make money. She actually had a boyfriend, but she wanted to buy a brandname purse and her family wasn't rich. She secretly started working as an escort. When she was telling this to me, she was crying so hard. I asked her if she would do the same thing if she had a second chance. She said she would make the same decision. (我想補充，其實90後點樣面對自己無錢問題，我最近聽過朋友講，因為冇錢，所以要去援交，其實佢有男朋友，因家中冇錢，但要想買個名貴袋…所以背著男朋友去援交，佢會當著我講，哭得好厲害，我問佢，咁下次冇錢會否都是這樣，佢話都會繼續)*
>
> *WKY: What was your friend trying to illustrate? (你呢個朋友想說明啲咩先？)*
>
> *CHING: I think my friend was just immature. Why did she have to buy that expensive purse? Is it even a better purse? (我認為我朋友只是唔識諗…點解一定要買個貴袋，唔通真係會好啲咩?)*

The adolescents recognized the influence of materialism had a strong impact on their social and psychological aspect of living. Because of being in poverty, they did not dare to have any materialistic desires. The price of that luxurious handbag could

easily be equal to the monthly expenses of the friend's family. Ching believed pursuing materialistic satisfaction was irrational and never brought any happiness to anyone. Ching disagreed with her friend's action because it was just 'immature' (唔識諗). The most serious problem that her friend had was ignoring the familial connection and friendship. Therefore, other members of the group were very critical of the fact that Ching's friend had ignored her familial obligations:

> WING: I think people living in poverty don't necessarily live a worse life than the wealthy. Some of your possessions cannot be measured by money, such as family relationships. We often read in the news about a wealthy family suing each other for inheritance... I just don't want that to happen to me! (係啦，我覺得窮嘅人，唔一定生活得慘過有錢人；因為有時你擁有野，唔一定有錢就有，好似家庭關係，睇新聞見到啲富商會因為爭產家無寧日，... 我就唔係好想啦!)
>
> FAY: I've witnessed how poverty doesn't always represent sadness; I feel that there are things to be truly happy about even when living in poverty. (睇到貧窮並不一定唔開心；即使生活在貧窮也有開心事/情，我覺得係咁樣)

Wing's comment reflects the fact that she has gained an impression of the lives of the rich from social media; the rich neglect their family in order to pursue selfish ends. The group view that family relationships should be protected at all costs was summed up by Chun: "I feel the happiest when my family loves me…" (我覺得最開心就係有屋企人錫…). Through their group construction, the adolescents defined that having a good family relation was as the solution against the unhappiness of being deprived by poverty. There was the choice of the adolescents to resolve the relational dilemma (Gilligan, 1982) between their personal interest and their parents' expectation. Such abstractions could not provide any concrete assistance. Eventually, they had to cope with the challenges on their own feet.

4.3.4 Pursuing happiness through self-contentment

The group sometimes questioned the nature of happiness. The adolescents narrated in the inquiry group were about their struggle to achieve a sense of happiness. They wondered if self-contentment represented the road to happiness:

> *CHING: ... People question if it's true happiness [i.e., the happiness of those living in poverty]. They wonder if it's a self-deceiving or real happiness. Actually being happy is simple. Although I don't have money... I've learned to be easily content! Just completing an assignment can make me feel satisfied and happy. (...人地會問是否真係開心先，是自欺欺人開心，還是真係開心呢？ 其實開心可以好簡單，雖然我冇錢...反而係要學識容易滿足架嗎！ 可能功課上，完成左，我都會有成功感開心架!)*
>
> *YEUNG: I think we can create our own happiness. Completing an assignment or getting good grades makes me happy. Some classmates who can afford private tutorials do not have good grades; they are unhappy. (我認為係自我創造嘅，完成功課，好成績我已經開心架，啲有錢去補習的同學成績唔好，咪係好唔開心。)*

The group members emphasised that unhappiness had not defeated them. They were tough fighters and would develop alternative methods to pursue happiness. Ching drew attention to the possibility that their "happiness" could be a self-deception, but ultimately she and the rest of the group believed that their happiness was real and was closely related to a sense of personal pride and contentment. Yeung's comment that we "create our own happiness" also draws attention to the fact that happiness involved a decision to be happy and find satisfaction in the accomplishment of ordinary things—like a well-done assignment.

> *NGA: That's why I think living in poverty does not necessarily mean unhappiness. ... Even though various unhappy events and emotions occur in life. (所以我認為貧的生活並不一定是唔開心..即使生活有不同不開心的事、物及情)*
>
> *WAI: I agree. For example the inability of satisfying one's materialistic needs... (係啦，例如唔能夠滿足物質上之需要)*

FAY: Exactly. People are more likely to be unhappy when they only focus on comparing money and material possessions with others. (係啦，只係金錢及物質方面成日同人比較就容易不開心)

Although the group agreed that poverty did not condemn people to a life of unhappiness, the members diverged on the best way to pursue it. Fay and Nga believed that happiness was a personal and subjective feeling, and not necessarily a product of one's living conditions. Fay observed, "The simple fact that we are alive can be something to be happy about" (其實簡單可以生存在世上都係開心架). Wai agreed that people could choose how to react to their situation: they could decide to bemoan their poverty or to concentrate on what is good. Sometimes, happiness just depends on one's particular frame of mind:

WAI: Sometimes I will compare what I don't have with what my friends have and that keeps my self-esteem low. When we go shopping, I cannot buy whatever I want like my friends. Sometimes when everyone purchases the same item to show unity, not buying it makes me an outcast, and my friends will tease or neglect me. Sometimes I don't have sufficient food or clothing; sometimes money is the trigger of family conflicts, sometimes the inability to participate in extracurricular activities prevents me from achieving my full potential. I feel helpless and powerless. (我有時會因為朋友有的東西我沒有，相互比較下感到自卑；其次和朋友逛街時不能亂買東西，例如同學間一齊買友情信物，如果唔買就引致同大家唔合群。被人取笑或輕視；無錢也令到自己穿不暖及吃不飽；而且金錢整到家庭糾紛；同埋無得參加一些課外活動，阻礙自己潛能發展，力不從心。)

NGA: You sound like there is nothing that could make you happy? (咁你講到好似無一樣野令到自己開心咁？)

WAI: It isn't like that. I think maintaining a great relationship with family members is the happiest thing. (咁又唔係，我認為與家人有良好關係就最開心)

Wai was willing to show his vulnerability to the group and shared his feelings of inferiority and loss of face when he could not join in his friends' purchases. His bleak outlook was at odds with the group's general belief in the pursuit of happiness

through non-materialistic means. As the above exchange shows, Nga immediately challenged Wai's feelings of inferiority and desperation. The others, too, took a more optimistic approach, which encouraged Wai to improve his outlook:

FAY: *Let me simplify my own thinking. Some tiny little things in life, such as having sufficient food for meal, can be very satisfying...* (自己諗簡單啲，即使是小事，如三餐溫飽也感到滿足...)

YEUNG: *I live a simple life and I value non-material things. I get along very well with family members. I have become more considerate and caring because I understand the stress and difficulty the family faces. Poverty makes me more motivated to perform well at school and that makes me happy.* (我其實生活簡樸、重視非物質東西上面，而且與家人相處融洽，因為了解家庭苦況，更懂得體諒與關懷；貧窮是動力...取得優異成績，因而感到快樂。)

CHUN: *More easily satisfied.* (容易滿足)

FUNG: *Being cared by friends and family.* (有朋友和家人之關心)

CHING: *You find out who really cares about you when you are in hard times. Family relationships are pure when money is not involved, and that makes you cherish your family more... You also seize every opportunity you get to study and participate in free extracurricular activities.* (患難見真情，在沒有金錢利益下的親情才是真，故更珍惜家人...而可以讀書和免費參加課外活動，故會珍惜該機會。)

NGA: *I think that when my family all gathers, I am happy.* (我都認為係一家人聚在一起也開心)

WAI: *There are so many different ways to make yourself happy even when you are living in poverty, for example, creativity.* (貧窮亦可以有很多方法使自己開心，例如自我創造)

CHUN: *Definitely! Even completing an assignment, taking a walk can make me feel happy.* (係啦，即使做完功課，有街去，也可以好開心。)

CHING: *I normally will set goals for myself so that I can feel satisfied after achieving them. It makes me feel happy.* (平時我自己也會自己定下目標，當完成後便可得到滿足感，令到自己也會開心。)

WKY: *Do we all agree that we should be happy as long as we are breathing and alive? Is it that simple?* (而大家都同意其實懂呼吸，能夠生存已經值得開心，是否這樣簡單？)

FAY: *It can be simple after all. Happiness does not necessarily correlate to money directly. The happiness obtained through material possessions is*

just self-deception. It is not real happiness. (其實可以咁簡單，所以開心同有無錢也不一定有直接關係。而有些在物質下獲得之開心其實可能只是自欺欺人，並不是真正開心。)

The collaborative method was well suited to the group's efforts to develop feasible and practical ways to pursue happiness despite poverty. Their recommendations included avoiding comparisons, thinking simply, valuing family, and achieving personal goals. Together they reached the general conclusion that "happiness does not correlate to poverty directly" (開心同有無錢也不一定有直接關係) and that self-contentment can overcome deprivations in other spheres.

> *YING: If your basic living needs are met, then it isn't even about money, you just need to be content with and cherish what you already have, without demanding more. Just like my mother says, "Zhi Zu Chang Le" (the person who is always content will be happy). (如果基本生活所需已經有，只要大家能夠滿足到及學會形惜擁有，不去要求更多，亞媽也成日提'知足常樂'，根本唔係有無錢問題。)*
>
> *NGA: Don't compare your financial means with those of others. Sometimes my friends have things that I don't have. Making comparisons then makes me feel less of myself. (在金錢方面唔好與人比較，有時朋友有的東西我沒有，相互比較下感到自卑)*
>
> *FAY: Try not to care how people perceive you. (嘗試不在意別人眼光。)*
>
> *YING: Living in poverty will cause sadness, but when you optimistically live your life, you may find the joy of life. (貧窮生活都有不開心，但只要你樂觀地面對自己生活，可能會尋找到生活的樂趣。)*
>
> *SHU: Do things that make you happy—for example, getting flying colours in an exam. (做令自己開心的事，如考試考得好)*
>
> *WAI: Maybe because I am poor and cannot afford everything I want as wealthy people do, I will cherish everything I may possibly own. (可能因為貧，不能如有錢人想要咩便有咩，故一旦擁有，就會十分珍惜呢啲野。)*
>
> *CHUN: Be proactive. Find ways to improve your current circumstances and strive for a life with better material possessions. (積極啲，決心找出方法以改善現時狀況，靠努力達致好物質生活)*

By the end of the sessions, the group admitted that they did not have sufficient financial support (which would provide necessary equipment and learning opportunities) to meet their developmental needs. Still, they saw that an obsession with acquiring material goods could lead one to behave immorally. Finally, they decided to adopt their parents' adage, "Zhi Zu Chang Le" (the person who is always content will be happy, 知足常樂). The family is the key means of transmitting moral values to children (Kegan, 1994). Through the group narration, the adolescents internalized their family' values, which were then manifest in their thinking and behaviour. The inquiry process of the collaborative group operated as a means of self-persuasion: it reinforced the older generation's maxims.

4.4 Discussion of the mental burden of impoverished adolescents in the pursuit of happiness

According to Kegan's (1994) concept of the mental burden, adolescent's behaviours and perceptions are strongly determined by social expectations. Through the group construction, the study revealed that adolescents have developed themselves to conform to family and social expectations as a way to pursue happiness in poverty. It was interesting to see how adolescents' interpreted their experience and solution to cope with the challenges of poverty. The study revealed that adolescents had internalized these societal expectations, so they needed to find a way to interpret their experience in such a way as to ensure that they were not, therefore, denied happiness. As discussed above, they came up with three main mental burdens to maintain happiness in poverty:

- to regard being poor as not necessarily a bad thing;
- to appreciate self-reliance; and,
- to treasure and be content with their current living conditions.

4.4.1 Regarding poverty as "not a bad thing"

The society has set a general standard that children and youth should be able to enjoy life experiences, develop different potential, and receive available learning and social activities. Nevertheless, the haunting reality of these adolescents is different from their peers. Due to financial constraints, they did not have enough opportunities to join learning and social activities and could not possess material items. However, the inquiry process enabled the adolescents to adapt the discourse to their needs: the words "good," "bad," and "unhappy" were constructed in such a way that poverty was not longer necessarily a bad thing that would mar their chances of happiness. As Fay and Ching's mother suggested the thinking of 'Zhi Zu Chang Le' (the person who is always content will be happy 知足常樂), they had learned to reframe their mind-set of treasuring everything what they had and preferred a simple lifestyle. They were taught to interpret the simple things to achieve the feeling of happiness, such as the completion of school projects and homework, and the acquisition of good school performance. Significantly, the family relationship was constructed to be one of the most important things they possessed and ensured the adolescents' happiness of being in poverty. In this respect, the adolescents developed what Kegan (1994) refers to as a "socialized mind," one that reconciles their thoughts and surroundings.

4.4.2 Appreciating self-reliance

Family support provides a firm foundation for children's development. Kegan (1994) observes that "societal demands initiate the process in which support is crucial" (37). Granting to the group narrative, the adolescents living in poverty, however, often did not get as much support as their cohorts even though their challenges were greater. Rather than feel sorry for themselves, the adolescents taking part in this study focused on the self-reliance they were required to build. Fay's two maxims—"not to covet what others have"(不要睇人地擁有什麼) and "to be satisfied with what we already have" (將擁有」看成值得開心野)—reframed the issue so that the adolescents recognized that they could rely on themselves rather than others. In Kegan's (1994) description, the adolescents were expected to adapt to

how parents or adults wanted them to believe —"claims on minds'" (19). They played along the way their parents or adults wanted them to perceive their experience. Still, we must consider whether the adolescents were mature enough to cope well on their own. It is doubtful that they were able to cope as effectively as they might have with adult guidance. Self-reliance, though a source of pride, is also an extra burden and one that can hamper a child's development.

4.4.3 Being content with one's current living conditions

The adolescents' determination to treasure what they had was connected with a view of consumption as evil. Fung told the group she would repair a broken phone, not replace it as her friend would. She depicted "dumping" the phone as wasteful, even immoral. When Wai complained about the things he missed, Nga chastised him. Wai quickly changed his position. This is in keeping with Kegan's concept of "social expectations": adolescents must align themselves with their surroundings. Wai stopped complaining and remained loyal to the group-constructed solutions. Members of the group did not always share the others' desires, but they still agreed to treasure what they had. This value was taught and reinforced by their parents. They furthered the belief of 'happiness was contentment' and passed that on to the succeeding generation. The inquiry process showed the adolescents to be a "good citizen" and "keep others (parents) in their minds" (Kegan, 1994) to be content current deprived living conditions. The group construction encouraged them to find simple and general ways to deal with individual and particular problems. However, their needs of material and support were denied.

4.5 Discussion of the social and cultural values and beliefs guiding the adolescents' pursuit of happiness

Gergen (1985) has proposed that what is described, understood, and even seen is not a direct consequence of how the world is but of how society interprets the

world. The study revealed that adolescents pursue happiness in socially and culturally prescribed ways. The importance of "comparative happiness" and the influence of tradition Confucian values were clearly evident.

4.5.1 The Confucian ideal of family harmony

The inquiry group agreed that their primary source of happiness was family connections. In Fay's narration, 'all sorts of possessions such as family relationship, living together' (開心野，例如:親情，一齊生活) were interpreted as key sources of happiness. In Chinese culture, social relationships play the largest part in the conception of happiness (Lu & Shih, 1997). It is not surprising, then, that family relations were a frequent topic of group discussions. Putting personal interests before family obligations was "not good": As Ching said, "If you are thoughtful and considerate, you will work hard to bring in more income to help out" (如你識思考，會幫補家計).

The adolescents' meanings of 'treasuring' and 'self-reliance' were constructed as the mean to maintain family harmony and causing less extra expense. They had to stamp down their demands. The Confucian philosophy has a fundamentally social orientation (Yang, 1995). It stresses the importance of fulfilling obligations in interdependent social relationships, creating and maintaining interpersonal harmony, and promoting the welfare and prosperity of the family (Yu & Yang, 1994). Wing pointed out that harmonious family relationships are more important than money: "We often read from the news about a wealthy family suing each other for inheritance… I just don't what that to happen to me!" (睇新聞見到啲富商會因為爭產家無寧日，…我就唔係好想啦!). The group's conclusion that family relationships are the essence of happiness was very much in keeping with Confucian ideals.

4.5.2 Comparative happiness

For many people, money is the measure of a person's value. If one adopts this view, poverty is inevitably associated with suffering and unhappiness, and wealth is associated with happiness (Hooper, Gorin, Cabral, & Dyson, 2007). However, the adolescents in the inquiry group interpreted their experience of living in poverty with different discourse — "not too bad". Bradshaw and Sainsbury (2000) explored the theory of "comparative happiness," which was borne out the group's experience of poverty. For instance, Wing and Nga both noted that their family relationships were better than those in wealthy families where there were arguments about inheritance. Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) maintain that adolescents balance or increase their self-esteem by comparing themselves with others who are worse off (downward comparison). There were also "downward comparisons" made with those who were even poorer. Fay noted "We need to be grateful considering the children in Africa" (只要想到非洲可憐的孩子便明白要感恩). Such comparisons helped the group be reconciled to their lot and thankful for the good things that they do have.

4.6 Discussion of the collaborative inquiry process

The discussion on the pursuit of happiness despite being poor was taken place in the early group process. In accordance with the collaborative inquiry process, the adolescents learned to involve in the determination of the inquiry direction. They tried hard to stay focus on the theme of their choice so they could gain insight into their lives and the issues that concerned them (Ridge, 2002). I invited the adolescents to share their interpretation of the experience of living in poverty. Fay was the first to respond to the question of whether or not deprivation was necessarily a bad thing (我覺得貧窮，唔係一定唔好嘅事). In the eyes of the senior adolescents, they might be socialized to perceive that living in poverty was not "necessarily a bad thing" and to figure out different ways to pursue happiness. On the contrary, the junior adolescents had real experience of hardship and deprivation in their living. These two groups of adolescents expressed their different feelings about their struggle to pursue happiness in the midst of poverty.

Fay started off the inquiry by giving a bold defence of the importance of pursuing happiness in spite of being poor and declared that the best coping mechanism was the use of non-material means. Most of the group members, especially those from the junior forms of high school, were influenced by this act of Fay. They did not focus the discussion on the negative consequence of financial deprivation, but on the benefits. Based on their experiences, they offered two pieces of advice: "don't covet what others have" (不要睇人地擁有什麼，我都擁有什麼 呢!) and "be satisfied and content with what you already have" (將「擁有」看成值 得開心野). Then, the adolescents continued to construct different ways to pursue happiness while poor. "Treasuring what you have", especially family relationships, was their primary means of minimizing the negative experience of poverty. As the group made use of the inquiry process to collaboratively co-create the knowledge that focused on finding successful strategies to help them pursue happiness even when they were facing all kinds of difficulties (Gehart, Tarragona, & Bava, 2007). Inevitably, the inquiry process also involved the group dynamic of mutual-influencing, or power-struggling among the members. The senior members tended to influence the junior to develop a common perception of "not such a bad thing" on living in poverty and a similar way of obtaining happiness.

In the inquiry process, I tried to facilitate the adolescents to make sense of their experiences. I encouraged them to be self-reflexive as advised by Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Kalu (2007). Heron and Reason (2001) postulated that collaboration helps adolescents make sense of their life and developed new and creative ways of pursuing happiness as well as coping with the miseries of poverty. The adolescents recognized that good family relationships were a source of happiness. They were determined to value what they had instead of being saddened by what they lacked. They also described their experiences in a positive way even though they were living in less than optimal conditions. The group narrative process encouraged the adolescents to see deprivation as a training ground for social and survival skills. As a result, the group came to the conclusion that "happiness might not correlate with

poverty directly" (開心同有無錢也不一定有直接關係) and that one could be content even if one lived in poverty.

The group did not rely solely on their own experience. They compared themselves with wealthy people who did not enjoy their lives. Wing maintained that the poor could have better lives than the rich because the former had better family relationships. Then the group realized that a happy lifestyle does not depend on having many possessions and that there is no causal relationship between money and happiness. Being poor might not be a bad thing, and it was up to them to determine whether they would view poverty as a curse, or a source of happiness.

During the inquiry process, the adolescents enjoyed the chance to share their viewpoints. Some very interesting ideas were introduced, which gave the group new insights into their situation (Bray et al., 2000). Although the tenor of the narration was that poverty was not necessarily bad, some members of the group were still unhappy about their living conditions. Two of the younger members, Yeung and Ying, described feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. At the final reviewing of the session, I asked if the group were all in agreement with the "experience of poverty" being "not necessarily bad" and "two maxims to pursue happiness". Under the influence of the other members of the group, the younger members had adjusted their view and agreed that being poor was not necessarily a bad thing. I pointed out that, as a social worker, my main task was to help them cope with their problems rather than just describe their experiences. I had to uphold the professional values of the need to render appropriate help to the adolescents to cope with their problem. This implies that I needed to guide the group with diverse views to achieve a compromised and socially accepted solution. These two younger members can be regarded as making a compromise on the pathway to happiness. The group inquiry can be interpreted as first allowing the group to externalize their multiple views, and then guiding the group to converge into a collectively agreed solution.

4.7 **Summary of the chapter**

This chapter dealt with the adolescents' view that their experience of poverty was "not necessarily bad" and the various ways in which they pursued happiness. Their discussion of their personal experiences of happiness and poverty illuminated an aspect of their lives that had not been revealed in other studies. In contrast to the subjects of other studies, the members of the group did not consider their deprivations and adversities to be entirely bad; instead, they saw them as a source of strength. Their poverty had taught them valuable lessons: to stop comparing themselves with others, to be satisfied with what they had, and to treasure the closeness of their families. The adolescents advocated that they could really achieve happiness through a non-materialistic way.

Through the social construction approach, the adolescents had to choose remaining silent to avoid relational dilemma and preserved harmony in familial relationships. Despite not being capable to fulfil their unmet needs, their family relationship was more important and was the core element of explaining their optimism.Although their parents were unable to fulfil all their needs, the satisfactions of their family relationships gave them an optimistic outlook. This outlook was supported by the traditional Confucian values of stoicism and family harmony, and by their application of the notion of comparative happiness, which allowed them to see themselves as better off than many others.

Chapter 5: Tackling socio-economic deprivation

5.1 Introduction

As a consumer-oriented city, Hong Kong is a frustrating and difficult place to live without sufficient money. As we have noted, Western studies have shown that adolescents living in poverty suffer from the lack of a decent living environment, insufficient food and clothes, and substandard learning opportunities (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Morrow, 2001; Ridge, 2002, 2007; Willow, 2001; Voltruba-Drzal, 2006). According to local socio-economic-cultural conditions, poverty and economic hardship increased pressure on adolescents living in poverty. (HKU and SoCo, 2002).

The adolescents participating in this study were eager to speak about their experiences of the challenges of poverty. Their deprivations were not only material but also social (e.g., lack of learning opportunities). The most important findings of the study show that the adolescents had to share their family obligations and to sacrifice their learning opportunities in order to preserve a harmonious family relationship. They also become the resources to support their family members, such as sharing household tasks, taking care of younger siblings, and so on. Surprisingly, when they described their attempts to overcome deprivation, they focused on their individual efforts: their families had insufficient resources to provide much help.

In this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of the current debate on poverty and socio-economic deprivation and will then analyse the group's narration on their experience of these hardships and their struggles of relational dilemma to find solutions that would not hurt others. I will also compare the mental burdens of poor adolescents with those from middle-income families. Finally, I will examine the

social and cultural beliefs and values that influence the ways in which the group interpreted and managed their experiences of poverty.

5.2 Poverty and socio-economic deprivation

"Poverty" immediately brings to mind low incomes and lack of money. "Deprivation" refers to difficulties caused by a lack of resources and learning opportunities (McKendrick, 2011). The stated objective of the public allowance scheme (CSSA) is to provide a safety net for those who cannot support themselves financially. The scheme aims to give recipients enough money to meet their basic needs. Still, children whose families rely on CSSA are less likely to be able to enjoy the benefits of adequate clothing or nutritional food (Green, 2007; HKU & SoCo, 2002; Muir & Gracey, 2007).

Of course, most adolescents face challenges as part of everyday life. For the participants in this study, those difficulties were compounded by the lack of familial resources and social and cultural activities (Morrow, 2001; Burnett & McKendrick, 2007). Recent research studies show that the educational gap between children from low-income homes and their peers begins in early childhood, so early intervention is necessary (Washbrook & Waldfogel, 2010). These early educational deficiencies and poor cultural capital become roadblocks to higher education (Ridge, 2002; Goodman & Gregg, 2010). This chapter provides a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of adolescents' subjective interpretations of their experience of deprivation and their means of response.

5.3 Struggling to survive in poverty

The inquiry group of the adolescents was eager to discuss the struggles associated with poverty. Through the action-reflection process, the adolescents gained insight into their deprivations and means of coping.

5.3.1 What are basic needs?

Wai's comments draw attention to the fact that basic needs are not only material. He insinuated that the tangible or material matter should include into the understanding of basic need. Ching and Wai complained that the daily financial budget only covered the very basic living expenses but not support their any learning expense. Their interpretations of basic needs really challenged my understanding of children's basic need solely relying on tangible resources and daily necessities.

WKY: What is your current condition of living? (你地依家生活情況係點？)

WAI: It does not meet basic needs. (是低過基本需要)

WKY: You mean it fails to meet basic living requirements. (即低過基本生活需要，未能滿足到基本生活需要。)

CHING: It can only cover the very basic living expenses, but we don't have extra money for other expenses. (只能滿足基本衣食住行的生活需要，但其他就有困難)

WAI: I do not have money to buy school supplies, including textbooks and other books for supplementary reading... (我無錢買學習的東西，包括書，參考資料...)

WKY: You have sufficient food.... As for going to school, it is not essential need. It's good to have food, why bother studying? Do you think studying is necessary? (你有得食，食得飽，....學野，唔一定要學，有得食就得囉，做咩要學野呀?)

WAI: As we all know, the middle schools expect students to have sport and art skills. Such skills give students a competitive edge in the application. Therefore, starting in primary school, we need to develop the talents that will enable us to get into a good secondary school. But belonging to groups, participating in sports, learning to play musical instruments such as "Erhu" or piano, or joining a choir costs money. Volunteering also adds extra points to an application. However, taking a bus to provide volunteer service costs money too. Therefore, I did not participate. I even could not afford to go to the school's Easter celebration last year due to my financial situation. (大家都知道，中學要有「一生一體藝」，但係小學也要準備架啦！方便第二時報中學用求報分架，參加制服團體、體育、唱歌、拉二胡，彈琴等等都可以有分加，所以只係睇成

*績係唔夠架。又或者要有做義工經驗，四圍去坐車去做服務也要用
錢架!我學校上年復活節會去交流，但係要俾錢，所以我都無去到!)*

WKY: So did you ever feel unhappy? (咁你有無唔開心？)

*WAI: Yes, but there's nothing I can do. The cost for the exchange program to
Mainland was HK$ 2,000. Even with the subsidy, we're still required to
pay HK$ 1,000. So eventually, I didn't go. (有啲，不過都沒有辦法，要
成$2000，有津貼也要$1000。所以我都無去到。)*

Given the same living conditions, different people will have different responses.
In the inquiry group, Yeung had different experiences and his perceptions. He was
satisfied with his current 'bread and butter' and thought his basic needs were met.
There may be other factors, however, that account for Yeung's greater sense of
acceptance. Yeung was still in primary school and was considered a good student.
Others, like Wai, who were in higher forms, were subject to stricter criteria, and
Wai's grades were only acceptable. The academic demand to the junior grade (e.g.
Yeung) was lower than the senior grade (e.g. Ching and Wai). That was why Yeung
might not share the Wai's frustration of losing learning opportunities.

*WKY: Has anyone else had a similar experience? Or something else to add?
(其他人有無試過？又或者想講其他？)*

*YEUNG: I think I have a good life. Having money doesn't mean you are being
loved and cared for... I would like to thank my mum and dad. Although we
four live in a subdivided room that's smaller than 100 square feet, that's
our 3-bedroom 2-living room apartment [joking]. Your first step is into the
living room; your next step will be in the bedroom, where the three-story
bunk bed is like a pavilion... Life is easy. (我覺得我生活得幾好，有錢唔
代表有人愛，有人錫...我都好多謝爸爸媽媽，雖然我地係 100 尺唔夠
住 4 個人板間房，我都有 3 房兩廳啦，踏一步就係廳，踏下一步就係
房，庭台樓閣...碌架床三層就係庭台樓閣...生活就係咁。)*

In spite of the provision of "free and universal education" in Hong Kong,
students are assessed according to not only their academic results but also their
extracurricular activities. All are taken into account when determining a student's
potential for advancement to further study. The current system has been criticized for
creating obstacles for students from low-income families. Wai spoke for many of his

peers. The members of the group agreed that the understanding of basic needs should be extended to include learning resources and opportunities. The adolescents shared the Chinese belief in education as a crucial means of climbing the social ladder. Moreover, the demands of the education system should also shape their parents' views of what constituted basic needs: they knew that education was vitally important if their children were to rise from their current social position.

5.3.2 Socio-economic deprivation

The adolescent narrated in the inquiry group was about their struggle to survive in living situation of socio-economic deprivation. Uncommonly, they were not just concerned about their current problems: they experienced the relational dilemma with their families, and worried about the challenges they could face in the future:

> *CHING: You are so easy to satisfy... I really feel the pressure... (你咁低要求... 我就覺得有壓力就真...)*
>
> *WKY: What's that pressure? Psychological? Or, practical? (係一種咩壓力呀? 係心理? 實際上?)*
>
> *CHING: Both. (心理，現實兩個都有架)*
>
> *WKY: What's that psychological pressure? Really! (嗰個心理壓力係咩嚟架? 係真係!)*
>
> *CHING: I think a family must have some savings for emergencies such as illness. It's very expensive going to the hospital... I have no idea what I'd do if I were sick. (覺得屋企必須儲定一筆錢，依家睇醫生去醫院也很貴...有病唔知點算。)*
>
> *WKY: Medical? (醫療?)*
>
> *CHING: Yes. If you do not have any savings, how can you pay the medical bill when you are sick?(係架，如果你無筆錢，有病時攞唔到筆出嚟，點算？!)*
>
> *WKY: But those with low incomes are exempted from paying medical fees...? (但如果係低收入係睇醫生可以有豁免...?)*
>
> *CHING: Of course... But they have to wait for a whole day to see a doctor. If I had money, I would be able to see the doctor at my convenience... (當然有... 但要等成日先可以見到醫生，我有錢就可以去睇就近啲醫生啦...)*
>
> *SW/R: So have you ever tried to do so? (咁你有無試過睇?)*

CHING: Of course not. I did not go to see a doctor. I just took some prescribed medicine and recovered after a few days. (當然無...最終我咪食成藥就算...幾日後就好返啦!)

Ching believed most of the adolescents in the group have experienced pressure and difficulties in their lives. She worried about receiving medical care if necessary. In this respect, is was very much following traditional Chinese culture, which holds that it is necessary have money in reserve for an unpredictable crisis. Their lack of savings was a worry to the group:

WKY: Has anyone had other experiences? (其他人無其他經歷？)

YING: Schooling... To get further education costs a lot of money for tuition. A family must save some money for school enrolment if educational opportunities arise. Without sufficient savings in hand, you cannot continue going to school even if given the opportunity.... (仲有讀書... 因為依家升學時要交好多錢學費，如果你唔係有機會報時 (即使未需要報讀)，都要屋企儲定一筆錢架，所以如果手頭上資金調動不足，咁就有書都無得讀...)

Besides financial constraints preventing appropriate medical treatment, the adolescents raised the common problem of lacking 'learning opportunities'. Although In Ying's narration, she was still in secondary school and hoped to attend university, but the prospect caused her anxiety because of not affording university tuition, which are four times and eight times their monthly living expenses, respectively. Adolescents living in poverty can try to save money for the future by limiting daily expenses, but this, of course, means that their present lives are even more deprived.

NGA: Borrow money. Some of my friends did the same! (借番嚟囉，我有啲朋友依家都係咁架啦!)

WKY: Your mean your parents have the ability to borrow money.... From whom? (你即係話，父母有能力借到錢...搵咩人？)

NGA: Relatives. (親戚)

WKY: Relatives... sounds fair enough! Better than having no one to borrow money from! If you have no relatives.... no one to lend money to you, what

can you do? (親戚....有得借已經好好呀!如果連親戚都無...無人可以借，咁點?)

YING: Give up. (放棄)

NGA: In fact, poverty restricts many life opportunities. Even though one can apply for CSSA, it does not make life carefree. The allowance is just barely enough for basic daily expenditures, definitely not enough to cover other expenses. (其實無錢呢種係生活限制，雖然可以申請綜緩，但並唔係無憂無慮，只是夠平日基本開支，其他野就唔洗諗!)

In the course of this group narration, Nga allowed himself to vent his frustrations about the restrictions of CSSA recipients, who are also often stigmatized by the general population. The negative stereotype of welfare recipient discouraged the adolescents to pursue personal goals. Ying's hopeless response — "Give up"(放棄) — reinforced the sense that for these adolescents many opportunities are simply not available:

CHUN: It can barely meet the basic needs. I have no extra money to afford any stuff other than necessities.(只能勉強溫飽，買唔到必需品以外啲野。)

YEUNG: Not just that... we also need money to go to school and after-school tutoring! (當然唔止... 至少依家學野也要好多錢!)

WKY: Tuition... Learning? (學費...學習?)

CHING: Yes, now everyone gets private tutoring. If I do not get a private tutor, I am unable to compete with the others. However, the tuition for one subject is very expensive... other students can afford tutoring for all subjects, but I can only afford one subject at most. (有呀，依架個個都要補習，自己如果唔去補習好似唔夠人爭...但係每一科都好貴...人地可以補晒全科，我最多也只可以補一科)

WKY: Must you have tutoring? (你一定要補習咩?)

CHING: Of course, yes. For high-school students, what school teaches is not enough. And since no one at home can teach us, we need to find someone to help us. A private tutor is one of the options. However, I will suspend tutoring for a while since the family does not have sufficient money to pay. (當然要啦，始終我地高中單靠學校唔夠，而且我地返屋企又無人教，唔識也要搵人問架啦! 補習就係其中一個方法!不過有時如果屋企唔夠錢，我會暫停先架)

Owning consumer items were essential for the youth to social integrated to their peer groups. Chun reflected that deprivation led to difficulties of social isolation. Ching shared the similar experience of losing learning opportunities due to insufficient money and revealed the life challenge of lacking family support all the time. Although adolescents might feel that the situation was frustrating and unjust, they balanced a relational dilemma (Gilligan, 1982) between demanding family support to match their personal need, either or paying up their chances to preserve family relationships. The group inquiry revealed that the adolescents were torn between their desire to overcome clear deprivations and their loyalty to their families. It is the financial situation of their families that has made it impossible for them to pursue the paths open to others. Still, they did not want to blame their families; on the contrary, they showed a great deal of understanding.

5.3.3 Sharing the family obligations

The adolescents in the group had all taken on a "second shift" of family obligations after school hours. Although they had become accustomed to bearing this extra burden, they could not fail to recognize that they did so at their own expense:

> FAY: I have not learned babysitting, but I need to take care of my younger brother…. I can refuse to do so, but if I do not take care of him, he will have to survive on his own. So, I don't have a choice. (我未學過育嬰，都要照顧自己細佬…我可以唔照顧架，不過我唔照顧佢，佢就會自生自滅，就冇辦法啦)
>
> WKY: What Fay has mentioned is similar to our previous dialogue. You will never leave your younger brother alone! There is no choice for you: you have to take care of him. (阿霏講法，就近似正話講法，你唔會俾細佬自生自滅架嗎! 依架係冇得選擇，即是焗(被迫)著去做!)
>
> FAY: I don't have a choice. Others may have more family members or employ a helper to assist. (係冇得選擇，有啲人會搵屋企人或工人照顧)

Through the group narrative, the adolescents expressed lack of family support in their lives; they also demanded to share the family responsibilities and obligations. Fay was a young girl but needed to take care of her younger brother. Facing this

situation, Fay felt herself to be helpless —" I don't have a choice" (係冇得選擇) — as alternative arrangements were not available. Many of the adolescents in the inquiry group who had accepted such roles felt equally helpless:

> WKY: So, what is the meaning of "no choice" to you all? (咁「冇得揀」對大家來說有咩意義？)
>
> CHING: So, "no choice" means you are forced to do something you would not do if you had choices.... I have to stay at home. I don't have time to hang out with friends or participate in other activities. (咁「冇得揀」就係焗住(被迫)…我要被迫留係屋企，自然無時間出去同朋友玩或參加活動啦!)
>
> WAI: Restriction... (限制…)
>
> FUNG: Yes, even if one has the ability, one has no chance to do so. (係囉，即使有能力去做也沒有機會去做到。)
>
> WAI: The wealthy youth have their families to pave the way for them from the starting line, but we need to prepare our own path. (有錢人起步點，樣樣也有家人已準備了他們後路，但我地就要靠自己一手一腳去準備自己後路。)

Ching shared Fay's sense of "having no choice." No matter how hard they tried to strive for better living conditions, the effort was in vain. During their discussion, the adolescents once again insisted on the importance of maintaining family harmony and cultivating self-reliance. They showed thoughtfulness and empathetically understandings towards families' conditions and seldom needed any help from their parents. Most also showed empathy for their parents' difficult choices:

> FAY: Yes, we need to plan our future by ourselves…. Not because our families do not want to help us, but they are excessively busy working to survive, therefore, they don't have any time to help us... (係啦，我地好多時也要靠自己打算…雖然唔係屋企人唔想，但佢地也會忙於搵食返工，佢地也會無時間可以幫我地打算啦…)
>
> SHU: I understand. I know that it's not because our families do not want to help us. Most of the time, they really don't have money for us to participate in activities. Even if we have potential talent, we don't have the opportunity to discover and develop it. I wanted to play the piano... and I

learned it for a while when I was in primary school. I quit piano lessons later in secondary school when my family needed the money for other uses, so they did not have money to support me any longer... (我都明白屋企唔係唔想，但好多時真係唔夠錢參加活動，即使有潛能都唔能夠被發掘... 我想學彈琴... 小學時學過一陣，但升到中學屋企就因為其他用錢多左，所以無得俾我去再學...)

FUNG: *That's why I give up learning anything.... Because I knew, I would have to stop at some point due to money shortage, so I prefer not to start anyway... (所以點解我會放棄唔學... 因為明知也會中途無錢學架啦，所以不如唔好開始學先... 。)*

YEUNG: *That's why I don't think basic needs only include clothing, food, housing, and transportation. Without money, we can't even afford learning opportunities... (所以我覺得不能滿足到日常生活需要，已經唔止係衣食住行，無錢都仲有我地學習機會不足...)*

CHING: *I have considered to learn dancing... but my family thought the dancing class fee was too expensive. They think it would be better to spend money on private tutorials than on dancing.... I had an argument with my family.... Of course, I eventually gave up dancing... as I don't want to have conflicts with my family. (不過我試過因為想去報跳舞...屋企人話太貴，話如果要報不如報補習好過...咁樣就同屋企人發生爭執...當然最終就無學到...費時同屋企人嘈、發生爭執。)*

YING: *To maintain a harmonious family relationship is very important. One of my friends argued with his family about financial issues; the conflict escalated into a fight. The family relationship is ruined. I don't want to be like that. (家人之間和睦相處很重要，我有個朋友因為用錢同屋企人有分歧，於時就爭執起來，破壞和諧，言語上之爭吵不休，而且仲與家人冷戰、離家出走最後仲打起來，我都唔想咁樣。)*

The adolescents were required to maintain a delicate balance. In order to maintain family relationships, the adolescents were willing to partake in extra family obligations and resisted their own personal interest. For instance, Ching and Ying preferred to maintain harmonious relation and avoided conflict and quarrel with their family. Incorporating Gilligan's (1982) concept of relational dilemma, the adolescent made a conscious determination to silence for their pursuits, but carried extra family responsibilities in order to keep the family relationships. They pursued opportunities but only to a degree that would not jeopardize family harmony:

FUNG: Sometimes, you really have to give up…. Because you have no money! (有時真的要...放棄就算，因為無錢就無錢架啦！)

WAI: I agree. If you have no money, you are unable to develop your potential. (我都係咁，所以缺乏金錢就等於無法發展自己專長)

SHU: We have to admit that we are not the rich. We cannot do what others can do or own what others can afford to own. We cannot make any complaint... (始終我地都唔係有錢，其他人做到、其他人有，我地無也無得埋怨...)

FAY: Though I admit that there is not much we can do to solve these problems, I always look for subsidized learning programs. However, there are not many. (雖然我都認為無辦法，但如果係一啲學野課程，我會睇下有無平啲或者有減免去學...雖然唔係好多位！)

YING: I have tried to apply for subsidies and eventually joined a program. (我都試過申請資助減免，最終都參加到個啲活動)

SHU: I think it's best if we could get into subsidized programs to participate in school activities, but there is not a very large quota. Sometimes such opportunities are available, sometimes not. (最好爭取參與學校活動，不過真係唔係咁多位，有時有...有時都無減免位架！)

CHUN: I have participated in some activities organized by NGOs aiming to assist the low-income... (我就去過一些幫助低收入士的機構參加活動...)

While all facing similar situations of deprivation, the adolescents took different approaches to cope with them. Fung and Shu were inclined to accept their lot passively, choosing to give up because they did not have adequate money. Others continued to look for opportunities. Ying submitted applications for subsidies to give her more learning opportunities. Chun enrolled in programs that targeted low-income households. Whatever what approaches they taken, the adolescents replaced the role of their parents to help and support the family dealing with the daily problems.

5.3.4 Self-reliance

Through the group narrative, the adolescents reconfirmed that they did not receive any help from their parents. Lacking sufficient resources, the adolescents learned to value self-reliance as the means to deal with their difficulties:

YING: In the long run, what we need is to study hard so as to get a good job in the future. That way, we need not be afraid of always living in poverty! (其實長遠都係努力讀書，將來找一份好工作，咁就唔洗怕...!)

YEUNG: We need to depend on ourselves and learn how to live. (平日要靠多啲自己、學識點樣生活架啦。)

WKY: Ming Yang believes it's important to rely on ourselves and learn how to make a living. What does that mean? (明揚認為要靠多啲自己、學識點樣生活架啦....即係咩？)

NGA: We have to rely on ourselves. There is no other option. I don't even remember when I started to cook for myself because the adults had to work overtime. I had to cook; otherwise, I wouldn't survive. (唔靠自己都唔得，啲大人要返工，又長時間，我唔記幾時我都已經自己煮野食...呢啲都係在迫出來架，唔係點樣生存落去!)

YEUNG: Actually, we gained these living skills when we were very young. My upbringing forced me to develop these skills! (其實我地好細個都應該有這技能，生活環境令我發揮到出來!)

CHING: We are not like our schoolmates who were born and raised in [financially] solid families, where there are helpers to assist with cleaning and cooking. Therefore, they have no chance to learn. We know how to do the housework because our parents have to go outside and work; we need to take care of ourselves and sometimes even our younger siblings. (我地唔似屋企好(經濟)的同學，佢地有工人幫手掃地、煮飯，唔洗佢地做，邊有機會試呀?我地就會識，因為屋企人要工作，要自己做，有時連照顧弟妹都會識架。)

NGA: We live in different families. And that's normal. We have more living skills than they do... (佢地同我地生存環境好唔同，所以都好正常!我地識嘅技能多過佢地...)

Although the adolescents felt incapable of changing their current living conditions, they were convinced that they would win the battle against poverty in the long run. This attitude was not the product of optimism but of the lack of any other choice. They could rely on their endurance skills to manage with their difficulties without the families' support. Although they claimed to be independent, the adolescents whispered about the feeling of helplessness in their stories. As Nga observed, "There is no other option" (唔靠自己都唔得). Their confidence in themselves was bolstered when they compared themselves to their better-off peers:

FAY: I have several wealthy classmates. When we go for picnics, they do not even know how to tie their shoelaces. An F.1 student who doesn't even know how to tie shoelaces?! What's the point of being rich if you can't tie shoelaces! ...(我同班同學有幾個都幾有錢，咁我地去旅行，佢話唔識綁鞋帶，中一囉喎，點解唔識綁鞋帶?有錢又點呀，連綁鞋帶都唔識...)

NGA: Some even do not know how to make instant noodles. (有人連誇張到煮公仔麵都唔識。)

WAI: Your class is fine. Some in my class do not know how to boil a pot of water. (你班都好，我班連煲水有人都唔識。)

FUNG: I have all the skills to handle problems in my daily life. (我應付到日常生活上出現的問題同擁有所需要的技能。)

FAY: Though living in poverty means limited resources, we do have more opportunities to learn a variety of life and survival skills. (雖然生活在貧窮資源有限下，但能夠有更多機會學習不同的生活技巧及生存能力!)

YING: I do grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, and take care of younger siblings, but my classmates don't have such life skills. It is really the hard living conditions that make us capable of doing this...! (我地懂得買菜煮飯，打掃及照顧弟妹，但我啲同學唔係好識喎! 不過有啲野真係形勢令到我地會學識架...!)

In the group narrative, adolescents constructed a positive idea of self-reliance. Fay, Wai, Fung, and Ying used "down-comparisons" with their classmates to bolster their self-esteem. The adolescents reframed their situation so that deprivations became a vehicle of growth and even a kind of privilege.

SHU: I think I'm good at collaboration, communication, and sharing with others. My classmates may get used to giving orders, and they act like they are princes and princesses. Sometimes it's difficult to get along with them... they ask for help even for minor tasks ...How would they know how to cook or do housework ...(我認為我幾叻與人合作、溝通及分享；我啲同學可能平日慣有人"使"(指令別人)，所以有啲少爺仔、大少姐的脾氣，有時真係好難相處架...少少野也也叫人幫...佢地點會識煮飯及做家務...。)

CHING: These unique life skills and survival strategies can only be developed in poverty. (這些獨有的生活技巧及生存能力與生活在貧窮的關係。)

WKY: Well, we have talked about the unique skills and our differences from others due to living in poverty. Why have we got better life skills? (好，大家也講過因貧窮而所擁有之技巧和其他人有何不同？為何會有較好的生活技巧？)

CHING: When our parents go outside to work, we need to take care of younger siblings and do housework so as to share their burden. There is no way for us to ask other people for help. (因為父母外出工作時需照顧弟妹，處理家務，以減輕父母負擔，唔通樣樣都叫人咩？)

NGA: Yes. Our parents need to work. No one takes care of us; therefore, we have to not only take care of ourselves and also look after our younger siblings... (係架，因為無人照顧，家長又需工作，除了自己照顧自己也要照顧弟妹...。)

FUNG: We have to rely on ourselves. Without any assistance from outside, we discuss labour division to do the housework together with our brothers and sisters... (我地要靠自己，在無人幫助，所以會同兄弟姊妹識分工合作，大家都要傾架啦...。)

Shu and other adolescents found appreciation to their daily performance in living and assured their personal capacities to cope with the hardships and challenges. It should be noted, however, that this discussion of the benefits of deprivation was followed by an admission of the bleaker sense of opportunities and experiences that were missed:

SHU: Sometimes we need to learn a lot... and think a lot to face the reality. It seems that we don't have a normal childhood. (有時要識咁多野...有時要諗咁多現實的生活處境，連童年都好似唔見左。)

YING: We have to manage our own lives, to take care of our siblings, as well as to do housework. Compared with children of our age, we are more independent and sophisticated. (生活事情都需自理，仲要照顧弟妹、打理家務，故相比同年齡之小朋友，我地大多較為獨立及世故。)

SHU: We have more things to consider and worry about. Getting mature at such a young age may lead to a missing childhood and unhappiness. (思考憂慮之事情較多，成熟咁就會失去應有童真，可能導致不快樂。)

WKY: Have you ever thought about or talked about what you shared today? (你地今日咁講，以前有無咁樣諗過同埋咁樣講過?)

> NGA: *No. It is just because this is our topic today, and when I heard what others shared, I had the same feeling... I am not alone... (點會無啦啦去諗! 不過今日聽到大家講嘅情況，我又好有同感... 唔係剩係得我咁...)*

Here we see the advantages of the group narrative approach, which provided a time and space for the adolescents to reflect on their shared experiences. The study could unfold the adolescents' voices of experiencing in poverty. Although the adolescents recognized that the survival and social skills they had acquired in the living of poverty, they came at a high cost.

> CHUN: *Yes, sometimes I do feel it is unfair. Why do I need to assume these responsibilities... but I also feel alright. At least I proved I am capable of taking care of myself. (係啦...有時我也會諗到好唔公平點解要自己去承擔...但其實自己也覺得幾好，至少可以証明自己有能力靠自己)*
>
> CHING: *Of course, it's best to live in a family that takes care of you.... But knowing that everyone is the same makes me feel better.*
> *(當然如果有屋企人照顧就最好...不過原來大家都係咁樣，咁我好似又舒服啲!)*
>
> FUNG: *Being capable of doing more [housework] is better than being capable of doing nothing... so we are very tough. (多樣野識好過咩都唔識...所以我地算係好堅強架...)*
>
> CHING: *You are exaggerating... (你咁得咁誇張...)*
>
> YING: *I don't mind saying so, and I think we are very smart. My friends may not know... (我唔介意咁樣講，我都覺得我地幾叻架，我啲朋友都未必識...)*

The group narrative process led the adolescents to view their deprived living conditions as a training platform rather than as a problem. They were willing but not prepared to take care of themselves and to apportion the family obligation. This might be another sort of undertaking. The discussion nurtured a sense of mutual sustenance and comfort to the each member and evoked them resonance of 'self-reliance' in living under poverty: "knowing that everyone is the same makes me feel better" (... 不過原來大家都係咁樣，咁我好似又舒服啲!). The adolescents

rationalized their experience of relying personal effort to cope with the everyday difficulties. They might boost a risk of splitting the family relation if demanding their families any help for their daily difficulties. According to Kegan's theory of "mental burden" (1994), such an undertaking and uncompensated tasks created greater stress for them and this was age inappropriate. Thus, they preferred to curb their need of help in order to maintain the relation with their families.

5.4 Discussion of the mental burden associated with socio-economic deprivations

The adolescents in the group experienced the foreshortened, "hurried" childhood that Elkind (1981) has described. Through the group construction, the study revealed that adolescents not only had trouble in living, but also undertook the family obligations in their everyday lives. They had to be thoughtful and empathetic to their families and performed as adults to share their family obligations. "The social expectation of self-preservation" (Kegan, 1994) forced them to address the challenges of adolescence without adequate familial or societal support. As discussed above, they came up with two main mental burdens to cope with the socio-economic deprivation:

- to meet their family obligations, no matter what sacrifice of their personal interests; and,
- to rely only on themselves when they encountered difficulties.

5.4.1 Family obligations as normal duties

The parents were expected to socialize and equipped their children with skills to deal with developmental challenges (Kegan, 1994). Due to their parents' long working hours, children in low-income families are often left unattended during the daytime in Hong Kong. The adolescents in this study were no exception: they described the "second shift" of family obligations that followed their school day. This often included taking care of younger siblings. They had to hold the attitude of

being thoughtful and understanding to their families. In some respects, these obligations were felt to be natural and normal, but at times the group seemed disheartened by the contrast between their lives and those of their better-off peers. Living in poverty did not only cause deprivation in adolescents' life, but also added extra mental burdens on their shoulders.

Their classmates from more affluent families had the luxury to choose what they wanted to be. As Wai observed, "Their families pave the way for them from the starting line, but we need to prepare on our own" (樣樣也有家人已準備了他們後路，但我地就要靠自己一手一腳去準備自己後路。). Apparently, though the group was struck by the unfairness of their lot, the adolescents dwelt not only their own situation but on the difficulties endured by their parents. However, the adolescents would no longer blame their parents for giving any helps to them. Kegan (1994) points out that it is during adolescence that individuals begin to feel responsible for the feelings and experiences of others. Therefore, far from blaming their parents, they showed great patience with their parents' handling of a difficult situation.

5.4.2 Relying on personal efforts

Although the adolescents prided themselves on being more competent than their peers, they knew that this competence had come at a cost. Added to their burden was the necessity to maintain a positive mind-set and not succumb to self-pity. In this respect, the research method used proved to be therapeutic. Through the social construction process, the adolescents had to alter the way they conceptualized their thoughts, feelings, and social relationships in order to "move beyond a fantasy-filled construction of the world" (Kegan, 1994, p. 20). As Ying pointed out, there was cause for unhappiness in the means by which they became more independent and sophisticated (我地大多較為獨立及世故). Shu also described the consequence of losing a childlike perspective as having "more things to consider and worry about" (思考憂慮之事情較多).

Confronting reality, the adolescents thought that they would be more competent in overcoming life challenges independently. Adolescents had acquired such beliefs from their experiences and parents' influence (Kegan, 1994). It was very clear during the group inquiry process that the adolescents tried to comfort and console themselves by adopting an optimistic attitude and framing their experiences as positive ones. Still, this extra mental task was another burden.

5.5 Discussion of the social and cultural values and beliefs guiding adolescents' attitudes towards coping with poverty

Humans build social constructs that reflect the cultural context (Best, 1993). Our study reveals that Chinese cultural values play a strong role in adolescents' interpretation of the experience of socio-economic deprivation. The adolescents in the group held on to the Chinese belief in the value of adversity in building character and overcoming hardship. As a result, self-reliance became the common strategy to cope with their deprivation.

5.5.1 Sacrificing personal benefits for family obligations

The adolescents repeatedly observed in the inquiry process that they valued family harmony more than their personal interests. This attitude reflects the emphasis on collectivism, rather than individualism, in Chinese society (Persson, 2010). Ching expressed that she chose to break up her personal stake to prevent stirring up her family relationships - '... Of course, I eventually gave up dancing... as I don't want to have conflicts with my family' (我試過因為想去報跳舞… 屋企人話太貴… 當然最終就無學到，費時同屋企人嘈、發生爭執). The study echoes that adolescents in China are socialized to help others and adapt to their parents' wishes, rather than to achieve individual goals (Ho, 1994; Lam, 1997; Meredith, Abbott, & Shu, 1989).

From a Confucian perspective, conflict among family members is prohibited (King & Bond, 1985; Hwang, 1995; Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997). Confucianism is the foundation of the Chinese value system. It teaches that stability and harmony are the foundation of a society (Park & Chesla, 2007). Moreover, Confucianism lays out codes of conduct that stress the importance of being polite and obedient. Certainly, the adolescents in this study always considered their family their highest priority. As in Ying's narration, the study revealed that the adolescents confirmed that "maintaining harmonious family relationships" was very important (家人之間和睦相處很重要) and tried her best to avoid any 'dispute with family'" (屋企人有分歧... 爭執起來). Family relationships were viewed as irreplaceable and were the prime source of happiness. No matter how difficult their plight, they expressed complete trust in their family and defended their parents' choices. Putting the family's interest before one's individual needs is very much in keeping with traditional Chinese values.

5.5.2 Cultural appreciation of the positive value of adversity

Despite Western influences, most Hong Kong citizens still embrace Chinese cultural values. They value adversity as a means of proving their capacity to overcome hardship. These beliefs are reflected in traditional sayings such as "Chi De Ku Zhong Ku, Fang Wei Ren Shang Ren" ("Hardship increases stature," 吃得苦中苦，方為人上人) and "Ren Ding Sheng Tian" (Man is the master of his own fate, 人定勝天). They trust that doing good will shore up moral credit (Wong, 2001). As Fay and Ching's narration in the inquiry process, they put positive meanings into the experience in poverty, such as acquiring more social skills and survival knowledge. Their voices of complaint were not loud.

Of course, these cultural beliefs are not innate; instead they are the product of socialization via parents, instructors, and peers. The adolescents were extremely appreciative of people's independence in overcoming adverse situations of poverty and brought on some other interpretation of experiencing poverty and hardship. A

healthy attribution style and faith helped an individual in coping with adversity (Hauser, 1999) and their adjustment could be influenced by optimism and beliefs about control in the lives (Werner, 1989; Pepitone, 1994). It is not surprising, then, that the adolescents in this study looked beyond their private world-view to find positive values in adversity and self-reliance.

5.5.3 Stressing self-reliance: The influence of capitalism and social welfare discourse

The beneficiaries of Hong Kong's welfare system are mainly individuals and families who cannot help themselves, principally single-parent families, those who are old, sick, disabled, or unemployed, and those who have special needs. Hong Kong citizens firmly believe in the importance of hard work, bettering oneself through personal achievements, and having an emergency fund for difficult times (Jones, 1990; Chan, 2003). The loss of personal independence lowers self-esteem. People also highly value family ties. When problems occur, help is sought first within the family unit. As in Nga's narration, he believed the mean of self-reliance as a normal solution and did not expect outside assistance.

The adolescents in this study share these views. They chose to rely on themselves instead of seeking help. Even the youngest member of the group, Nga, was taught to be self-reliant. The group's adherence to "Zi Li Gen Sheng" (self-reliance, 自力更生,) was fostered not only by their family and society but also by the Hong Kong government's welfare policy. Only when the family fails to come through do people turn to the community and social organizations for help. Government aid is viewed as a final refuge. Self-reliance is part of the grand discourse of capitalism (Chan, 2003), and welfare dependence is considered shameful (Jones, 1990; Chan, 2003). Undoubtedly, these social discourses really shaped the adolescents' interpretation of their experience and solution to cope with the challenges of poverty.

5.6 Discussion of the collaborative inquiry process

Collaborative inquiry is used as a tool for the co-creation of group knowledge and effecting change through learning (Gehart, Tarragona & Bava, 2007). I noticed that some of the members of the group had contributed very little to the discussion on their experience of deprivation in poverty during the inquiry session. The involvement of the participants was critical to the success of the inquiry process. Therefore, I tried to invite everyone to describe their current living situation and experiences of poverty in the group. Two members of the group, Ching and Wai, maintained that their living conditions were unacceptable and their challenges were too great to overcome. In contrast, the youngest member of the group, Yeung, focused on his positive relationship with his family and described his current living conditions as "good". When the rest of the group disagreed with Yeung and drew attention to their financial anxieties and lost opportunities, Yeung allowed himself to complain and admitted that poverty did have negative effects. The multiple views from the adolescents were appreciated and accepted in the inquiry process, but the majority voice always became louder than the minority ones.

The group collaborative inquiry process was well-suited to this study: it allowed the adolescents to discuss issues that they were not normally asked to express. Though they were quiet in the beginning, the positive support from the worker gave them access to their shared feelings and allowed them to gain a better understanding of their world (Winter & Munn-Giddings, 2001). The process also expanded my knowledge of their living situation and difficulties, and gave me access to information that would otherwise be unavailable.

Heron and Reason (2001) noted that collaboration allows participants to understand more fully their living conditions and better make sense of their lives. Given that there was little they could do to change their reality and that they wanted to be optimistic about their prospects, the members of the group focused on the importance of self-reliance. The inquiry process helped them discover this coping

mechanism and gave them a means of dealing with their problems (Heron and Reason, 2001).

Hearing the adolescents' stories about living in poverty, I became aware of the epistemological errors in my way of understanding the adolescents. I did not question whether their faith in self-reliance was appropriate. In making critical reflection on my assumptions that I had been upholding during the inquiry process, I discovered that I had subscribed to the social work value of "helping the clients help themselves". The problem was that I was unaware that I applied this concept with reference to the capitalist idea of 'self-reliance'. I, as a social worker-cum-researcher, did not help the adolescents make their critical reflection of examining the capitalistic idea of "self-reliance" and the relevance of this concept in their impossible living conditions of being poor. I did not impart my interpretation of the group members' situation, or discuss how their point of view had been shaped by ideological ideas being circulated in the Hong Kong society. I left it to the adolescents to look at their situation from their own perspective, rather than enabling them to develop new and creative ways of dealing with it (Heron & Reason, 2001).

5.7 Summary of the chapter

This chapter presents the group's narratives of the adolescents'' experience of socio-economic deprivations. They first constructed their interpretation of "basic needs," which they felt went beyond physical necessities and included learning and social opportunities. Their interpretation really extended the social worker's understanding of "basic need". In addition, this study identified that adolescents not only experienced socio-economic deprivation, but they recognized that they had what Elkind (1981) called a "hurried childhood," because of the additional responsibilities they had undertaken to help their families.

Through the social construction process, the adolescents took a positive attitude, pointing out the advantages of their position, such as their acquirement of many skills. Although adolescents had to sacrifice their personal stakes in society to fulfil

the families' demands, they did not complain to their parents. In the Gilligan's theory of relational dilemma (1982), the adolescents should choose to keep family relationships rather than their personal interests. The values they attributed to harmonious family relationships and self-reliance reflect Chinese traditional values and the prevailing capitalist ideology. Despite their ability to view their predicament in a positive light, the group members still conveyed the impression of "having no choice" and "being helpless" when it came to changing their basic situation.

Chapter 6: Fighting materialism in the midst of poverty

6.1 Introduction

Materialism often plays a central role in many aspects of everyday life—chatting with friends, watching television, arranging meals, and, of course, going shopping (Ridge, 2002, 2007; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2011). This chapter deals with the effects of a culture of materialism on young people living in poverty. Yeung's account of buying sneakers launched a wide-ranging discussion among the group members in the inquiry process. As we have seen, the group professed themselves willing to do without material possessions because they understood their family's financial limitations.

The study unfolded the adolescents' stories about their experiencing values dilemma on the material possession between their parents and their peer. The adolescents' attitude towards shopping was shaped by what Gilligan (1982) calls a "relational dilemma." While their families discourage a materialistic lifestyle, their peers encourage it (Kasser, Ryan, Zax, & Sameroff, 1995; Williams, Cox, Hedberg, & Deci, 2000). The group's desire for consumer goods was often portrayed as a means of gaining peer recognition. While their families had encouraged them to enjoy a simple, non-materialistic lifestyle, there was pressure not only from peers but from the media to consume. The adolescents had to cope with the social expectation on their solutions to fight against the influence of materialism. However, they might not have the knowledge and competence to meet with the social expectation without the family support (Kegan, 1994).

Still, the adolescents' attitudes were shaped by a number of forces: their families, the school system, their peers, and cultural norms. The social or peer environment also was a substantial element in weighing the effect on adolescent's endorsement of

materialistic values (Kasser, Ryan, Zax, & Sameroff, 1995; Williams, Cox, Hedberg, & Deci, 2000). The importance of looking at the local context when conducting studies on youth poverty was confirmed by the tremendous influence of the Chinese value of "Mian Zi" (face work, 面子) on the views of the adolescents of the inquiry group

In this chapter, a brief discussion of the current research on poverty and materialism will be followed by a thematic analysis of the group members' narratives of the relational dilemmas associated with their struggles with materialism. I will then discuss the particular mental burdens that poor adolescents face in a materialistic culture, the socio-cultural forces that have shaped their response, and the results of the collaborative inquiry process.

6.2 Materialism and child poverty

Hong Kong is known as a commercial hub. In a consumer society, socialization involves seeing material goods as a means of achieving success, happiness, and self-fulfilment (Chan, 2003a). Children and youth are exposed to such influences every day. Studies of the habits of Hong Kong adolescents show that they are eager to copy the lifestyles and own the luxury brands that are associated with celebrities (Chan & Prendergast, 2007; HKU & SoCo, 2002). The function of materialism is viewed to be the construction and maintenance of the self (Swann & Bosson, 2010). The objects, products, experiences, and services that individuals consume help to form the fabric of their identity and self-esteem (Belk & Pollay, 1985; Morrow, 2001).

The most obvious manifestations of materialism in Hong Kong are the proliferation of advertisements devoted to luxurious lifestyles and the popularity of brand-name goods. Being a poor adolescent in such a society is very difficult. Studies have shown that children and young people with fewer possessions (including learning equipment, toys, games, and clothing) are significantly hampered in their lives and social interactions (Crowley & Vulliamy, 2007; Elliott & Leonard, 2004;

Roker, 1998). The very high standard of living in Hong Kong exacerbates their difficulties. With their parents scrambling to meet their most basic material needs, these children suffer from considerable disadvantages (Willow, 2001).

6.3 Fighting the influence of materialism

Not surprisingly, the theme of resisting materialism resonated for the group. When they were given the opportunity to reflect on their past and current situation, they identified the value dilemmas associated with material goods and their means of addressing those issues.

6.3.1 Values and shopping

Through the group narratives, the adolescents showed they were more aware of the influence of their consumer culture. They narrated their experience of coping with challenges in the materialistic world. Even deciding to buy a pair of sneakers, different adolescents had different interpretation of material possession under the living in poverty.

> WKY: Everyone, feel free to share with us what happened recently. (大家隨便講下你地近來的事？)
>
> YEUNG: Buying sneakers? (買波鞋？)
>
> YING: Why do you suddenly mention buying sneakers? (點解要講買波鞋？)
>
> YEUNG: I was about to buy a pair of new sneakers last week because my old pair were worn out. Shoes are so expensive these days. (我啱啱要買囉，因為對學校波鞋爛左，所以上星期去買，但發現啲鞋都好貴!)
>
> NGA: What kind of shoes do you want? Are they an expensive brand? (咁你買咩鞋先？係咪貴野先？)
>
> YEUNG: I just wanted to buy a pair of normal sports shoes. (我買只是普通鞋囉)
>
> FAY: Are they famous brand or no particular brand? (即係名牌？!定雜嘜!?)
>
> YEUNG: Of course, no particular brand. How would I even think of buying brand-name shoes? I have no money. I just wanted something that's good enough for me to go to school. (緊係唔係啦，我點會諗買名牌。我邊有咁多錢買呀，著到返學就得啦!)

Yeung's concerns were focused on the price, not brand. His family's financial situation meant that he had never even considered expensive shoes. His decision was based on price and pragmatism.

> *NGA: Yes, a pair of brand-name shoes is expensive. They cost at least HK$ 600 to 700. My friend had to save very hard to buy a pair of brand-name sneakers. (係啦! 我要買對名牌鞋真係好貴架，至少都要成六、七百蚊。我有個朋友要慳錢先可以買到對波鞋，好辛苦慳先可以夠錢。)*
>
> *WKY: Well, how did he save money? (係，咁樣佢地點慳？)*
>
> *NGA: It seemed that he skipped eating breakfast! For about three months. (好似唔食早餐!每日將屋企俾佢啲早餐錢唔用，儲左成三個月架)*
>
> *FAY: Did his mum blame him for not taking breakfast? Wouldn't he be hungry when attending school? (佢亞媽無責怪佢咩？唔食早餐，佢唔會餓住返學咩?)*
>
> *NGA: I am not sure if his mum blamed him…. However, it is not a big deal to skip one meal; he can eat more at lunchtime. (咁就唔知佢亞媽有無責怪佢？...不過唔食餐無問題架，係午飯食返多啲就得啦!)*

Nga's narration introduced a different life experience and value comparing to Yeung's regarding how to handle material possessions. HK$600 to $700 is a lot of money when one's allowance on CSSA is HK$1500. Nga's friend was ready to sacrifice breakfast for three months in order to obtain brand-name sneakers. Nga supported his friend's decision, but as Fay pointed out, his actions might have upset his family.

> *WKY: Everyone has to buy sneakers. How long do you need to wait before buying a new pair? (其實買波鞋每個人都會有架，咁你地幾耐先會買過波鞋?)*
>
> *YEUNG: I needed to wait for a long time—until the old pair was torn. (我要等好耐架，等爛左著唔到先買啦! ?)*
>
> *YING: I usually buy a pair of new and durable shoes at the beginning of a new school year and I wear them for two to three years. (我多數開學前會買，因為D鞋著到好耐，起碼都著到兩三年到)*
>
> *YEUNG: I did not need to buy new shoes beforehand. I used to wear my brother's old shoes and when they are torn or do not fit, then, I tell my mum that I need a new pair. I do this because I don't want to waste*

money. (我以前啲鞋唔洗買，有時會著亞哥啲舊鞋，著到再爛或者佢唔啱著，先同亞媽講買，因為唔好浪費啦。)

NGA: That's fine. I have no older brother, so there are no old shoes to be passed along to me… if I need to buy shoes, I will shop around and save money for it. (咁好，我都無亞哥，點會有得執呀…所以要買鞋時就會睇啱就儲錢買囉!)

Their personal's buying decisions were reflections on their values of material commodities. Ying echoed to Yeung and commented on the value of durability. She stated that she "used to buy a pair of new and durable shoes at the beginning of a new school year and I wear them for two to three years". These two youngest members of the group, Yeung and Ying, provided an alternative view of their buying decisions on durability, affordability, and necessity.

The group narration of sneakers revealed a wide range of attitudes towards material goods. Fay recognized the temptation of brand names. Nga had some admiration for his friend's decision to make sacrifices for a brand name. He focused on the monetary value of sneakers: he was tempted by famous and expensive brands. , However, Yeung and Ying, the junior members of the inquiry group, were very aware of their parents' expectations and therefore had managed to suppress even the desire for luxury items. For Yeung and Ying, sneakers were entirely functional. The group revealed that the adolescents' experienced dilemma, juggling different values explicitly under the influence of materialism, but implicitly from the influence between their peers and their parents.

6.3.2 Peer pressure and material goods

Not only facing the material deprivation, the adolescents were also torn between their parents' and their peers' values when it came to the issue of material goods.

WKY: Why do you need to save money yourself? Wouldn't your family give you money to buy shoes? (點解你自己要儲錢，屋企唔會俾錢你買咩?)

NGA: They aren't giving me money, but the shoes they bought for me were not my style... I would rather save money to buy the ones I like.... (佢地唔係唔俾，只不過如果佢俾錢買啲鞋都唔啱我... 我寧願自己儲錢買....)

FUNG: Why not your style? (點唔啱喎...?)

NGA: What they buy is usually very old-fashioned; they buy that possibly because of the low price. I know my mum is very thrifty, so she will only buy stuff at a low price ... and the style did not suit me, so I would not ask my mum to buy them for me...(佢買親個啲款好老套，可能因為要就價錢，我都明白亞媽平日都好慳，所以佢買也會買啲平就算，所以嘅然唔啱就...我唔會再叫亞媽俾錢買...)

WKY: How would you save? (咁啲錢點來....?)

NGA: Sometimes I would skip breakfast and lunch to save money... (有時我咪唔食早餐、午餐咁樣儲錢....)

Nga was unlike Yeung and Ying; he was ready to affirm different values from his parents. Though he was sympathetic to his mother's need to be "very thrifty" (平日都好慳), he was not ready to wear the old-fashioned shoes that she provided and was determined to buy a more expensive pair of sneakers for school. Like his friend, Nga had no other means of saving money than cutting down on basic needs such as food. It is sad to think that it was more important to Nga to wear a pair of expensive sneakers than to be adequately fed. Living in a highly materialistic society is very challenging for a poor teen.

CHING: But I don't mind asking my mum to buy shoes for me. All kinds of sneakers look similar. Also, the family only gives me very little allowance, how can I save money? (不過我唔介意亞媽買，只係波鞋，對對也差不多；況且平日亞屋企都好少俾零用錢我，點可以儲呀)

NGA: You are only a primary school student. When you are in secondary school, your friends may tease you for wearing old-fashioned sneakers. You will know by then. (你地小學點同，我地大個讀中學...有時啲朋友會笑你架老套架嘛!你地升中學就知道!)

FUNG: Indeed. (係囉)

WKY: So friends will even compare shoes? (咁即係你地著鞋款式也會有朋友間比較？)

FUNG: Sometimes…. Of course, they will not always compare the style, but at least the shoes should be a well-known brand that can be recognized and accepted by others. (我一時時… 當然唔一定比較係款，但至少對鞋的牌子也係熟悉個啲，咁先係大家都'見得下人'…)

WKY: What do you mean by "can be recognized and accepted"? (咁見得下人係咩意思?)

NGA: Must be a name brand… not made in China or those no-brand shoes made in Hong Kong. (有一定牌子啦…唔通大陸、香港啲雜MARK咩)

As noted, not all the adolescents challenged their parents' attitudes towards spending. Ching, for example, believed it was not necessary to have expensive shoes. Following her parents In terms of Gilligan's theory of relational dilemmas (1982), Ching's actions were means of preserving harmonious family relationship. Nga, however, narrated the power of peer influences over his purchase decision. He sought peer acceptance and told Ching that her attitude will change in secondary school. Fung echoes Nga's views on the importance of brand names. All the group members were under pressure: some bowed to family pressure, or others to peer pressure.

WKY: But those name-brand shoes are very expensive! (不過呢啲牌子咁咪好貴!)

NGA: Yes, my mum would never be willing to spend money on expensive stuff. So if I want it, I need to save money on my own… not to cause any trouble to the family. (係架，亞媽一定厭貴唔捨得買，咁嘅然係我想買咪自己儲錢買….唔洗屋企咁煩!)

SW/R: So did your mum ever object you buying the name-brand shoes? (咁你想買咁亞媽唔反對你架咩?)

NGA: I won't… she knew… I am old enough; she would not bother me. (我唔會…佢都知，但我已經大個，佢都唔會理我。)

When I pointed out that brand-name sneakers were expensive, Nga countered that he was sensible and had found his own means of affording them without involving his parents. The price of the shoes was not a significant factor in his decision. Baker and Gentry's (1996) study found that older children see luxury items as a means of feeling good about themselves. Nga pointed out that he was at a

different developmental stage than Ching, which accounted for his choice: he was old enough (我已經大個) to be concerned about the opinion of his peers, not just his family.

Nga's attitude is the consequence of an unavoidable developmental challenge for youth in a materialistic society. As a 14-year-old boy, he was three years ahead of Yeung and Ching in terms of schooling and had lost the courage to withstand peer pressure. Gilligan et al. (1992) describe peer pressure as a challenge that affects adolescents' moral development at different stages. The group could see how peer pressure imposed values that would lead them to redefine luxury items as basic needs.

> *WKY: You wear sneakers most of the time…. how many pairs of sneakers do you have at home? (你地平日最多著的波鞋…同埋屋企有幾多對波鞋呀?)*
>
> *CHING: I have two pairs. (我都有兩對)*
>
> *WKY: So, I would like to ask if those two pairs of sneakers belong to a famous brand? (咁我好直接咁問你,啲兩着係唔係名牌嚟嘅?係唔係?)*
>
> *CHING: One pair. There is no problem wearing ordinary shoes to school; only if I go out with friends, I wear the name-brand pair. (一啲,因為返學就無問題,但出街時同班出街多數會著返對名牌)*
>
> *WKY: So... do you want to wear brand-name sneakers? (一啲...跟住我會繼續問,你想唔想着名牌波鞋?)*
>
> *YEUNG: I want to. (我都想架)*

Although younger members of the group such as Yeung and Ying did not seem to be determined to acquire status symbols, my question regarding brand-name sneakers led Yeung to confess his desire. He seemed to see how Nga would be led to yield to the temptations of materialism. Would Yeung feel the same way as Nga three years later? Would he see expensive brand-name sneakers as a basic necessity? Would he succumb to peer pressure and attempt to fulfil his desires? Undoubtedly, the values that the adolescents associated with sneakers or material items clearly had a relational dimension with their parents and their peers. Studies confirm that materialism exerts an increasing influence as children move into adolescence (Chan,

2003; Chan & Prendergast, 2007), thus exacerbating the relational dilemma. Parental approval of pragmatism over price carried greater weight for the junior members of the group—Yeung and Ching. Nga and Fung, who were senior, had grown to value the expensive and trendy options sanctioned by their peers.

6.3.3 The meanings of material possessions

During the group narrative process, the adolescents were given the opportunity to reflect on their views of material possessions. They were struggling to manage their desires and revealed their own meaning of material possessions.

> *WAI: Sometimes, I think about that. I'm sometimes really into a special brand. (想一時時啦,我想着一個牌子乍)*
>
> *YEUNG: But I need to consider the financial situation of the family, so I will not think about that. (不過我要睇屋企的經濟況狀,所以也唔會諗...。)*
>
> *CHING: Not those very famous brands, but something similar to what my friends have. (唔係咩名牌,只是同啲朋友個啲差不多...)*
>
> *WKY: We have talked about buying sneakers. Does anyone want to share with their experience of really wanting something expensive? Some famous brand? (之前大家講過買波鞋,其實大家平日有無類似咁的處境及經驗,想買一啲名貴或者名牌,想聽下大家的意見)*
>
> *YEUNG: It's already difficult for us to meet the very basic living needs, how can we afford luxurious goods? They are not for us. If I had money, I would spend it on after-school tutoring classes. (其他我地連基本生活需要的維持都困難,點會有額外的奢侈品。物質生活呢啲野,邊會有我地份,物質生活,邊有咁多錢呀!況且如果有錢多,我都寧願去補習啦!)*

The group was divided about the importance of brand names. Ying and Yeung would interpret the expensive possessions as undisciplined behaviours to family. For instance, Yeung was so self-disciplined and did not even allow himself to yearn for expensive possessions. He would rather spend money on tutoring. His desire to preserve harmonious family relationships was stronger than the appeal of material satisfaction.

WAI: I partially agree. To maintain a materialistic life one needs more money to buy luxury goods. Nevertheless, I don't agree that living in poverty means one can only meet the basic living needs… Luxury goods don't have true meaning in life; so we don't necessarily need luxury stuff to live... And poverty does not necessarily mean no luxury goods. For example, those who claim CSSA can also have lots of luxury goods, such as toys and gaming equipment. They can even get better stuff than us or the middle-class. Poverty does not necessarily mean no luxury stuff. Some people are materialistic because their parents cannot spend time together with them, so they spend money to make up for it. (我同意啲,物質生活係要有更多錢去買奢侈品,但唔認同貧窮生活只係滿足到基本生活上…因為奢侈品唔一定真實意義,生活上唔一定要奢侈品,但貧窮生活唔一定冇奢侈品,例如:領綜援嘅人，奢侈品都好多㗎…也有玩具呀,遊戲機,甚至比起我地呢啲或中產人士都多,我覺得窮唔一定冇奢侈品,物質生活係因為父母親冇法俾咁多安慰,唯有用物質求補償。)

CHING: Sometimes, I would wear a pair of brand-name sneakers for outings with my schoolmates. At least, I do not need to worry that they would tease me… though they would not necessarily do that if I wore ordinary shoes, I still can't help this way of thinking. (咁有時我也著返對名貴波鞋同同學出街玩，至少唔會擔心俾佢地指指點點…雖然佢地也未必會真係咁樣，但我都會有呢種想法。)

NGA: "Pretty" clothes to show off, "famous brands," ("靚"衫啦,榮耀啦,"名牌"啦。)

WAI: I like to wear "Pak Fan Yue" [a generic cheap sneaker]. Gorgeous... (我好鍾意著啲白飯魚 (非名牌及低廉價錢的運動鞋), 好靚架嗎...)

On the other group of adolescents, they were not encouraging the others to want luxury items, but offering an alternative point of view. Wai is the same age as Yeung, but he recognized that monetary deprivation does not necessarily restrict one to meeting basic needs. He was Wai explained that some parents buy luxury items for their children to compensate for their lack of support and care. In addition, Ching confessed that possessing "brand-name sneakers" gave her a sense of acceptance by her peers and helped her to avoid embarrassment and ridicule. Nga agreed enthusiastically. Three members of the group defended the instrumentality of brand-name goods, which, they claimed, helped them develop social relationships, status, and self-fulfilment.

FAY: I have several classmates who went to a 7-11 and shoplifted there. ... Their parents had given them pocket-money, but not enough, so they shoplifted. (有幾個同學去 7-11 偷野,為了這支野有附送物品去偷野,但佢地 Dad Mom 係有俾錢佢,但唔夠,所以就犯左法)

SHU: They are so immature. Why would they do illegal things to get the stuff they want? It would be better to borrow some money. (其實佢地唔識諗,點會因為買唔到去偷同犯法喎,去借錢都好啦!)

NGA: Some rich people shoplift for excitement. (不過有錢人都會偷野,有啲人偷野滿足刺激,有啲人偷野滿足需要。)

CHING: Yes. It's hard to combat material temptation, but that does not necessarily justify illegal behaviour..... If I wanted to purchase a pair of brand-name sneakers, I would save money... Of course, some may borrow money. (係啦,物質引誘,唔一定做壞事嘅,例如:我想買名貴波鞋,我會儲錢...!當然有啲人就要靠借錢去囉!)

WKY: You agree that material goods are tempting to you, but you will find your own way to meet your needs... (你同意物質真的會吸引你,不過你就會用你自己認為合適的去法去滿足...)

CHING: Yes, they are not basic necessities. It would be good to own these things, but we don't have to go after them. And obviously, people have different opinions. Sometimes they make mistakes because they are impulsive or greedy. (係,因為始終呢啲都唔係必須的,有就得,根本唔需要'追'。不過每個人當然都有唔同想法,有時可能係衝動或者貪婪之性格會令到自己做左錯事。)

Studies have shown that adolescents suffering from peer pressure can resort to criminal conduct (Ang, Cheng, Lim, & Tambyah, 2001; Chow, 2002; Kay, 1990). However, after Fay told the group about her shop-lifting classmates, Shu called their behaviour "immature." The group narratives revealed that adolescents had strong moral values against illegal means as a pathway to material possessions. Ching recommended more acceptable means of acquiring goods—saving and borrowing. All the members of the group had strong moral objections to shoplifting. They approached their problems in a rational and practical manner.

YING: I do not think about buying brand-name goods all the time. In fact, I think practically and substitute affordable goods. (其實我唔會時刻去想個啲名牌的物品,反而現實啲去諗自身水平可負擔之物品去取代)

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CHUN: Yes, sometimes we need to make a choice. If I actually want to buy something, I would save money for it… we don't have to commit crimes. (係啦! 有時也要作出取捨，如果自己真的想買，咁就自己節衣縮食去儲錢去買，唔一定要做壞事。)

FUNG: Sometimes I have this impulse to buy the luxury stuff others have. However, I'm not so silly that I would get it by committing a crime. (有時看到別人用些名貴的東西而自己卻因沒錢買不起，個心也會有個衝動去買左去，但事實我又無咁'傻'會選擇以犯法手段去獲得。)

YING: Yes, it's really bad that some classmates tease those who wear old-fashioned clothes. If they teased me, I would be very upset and humiliated. (係架，有時啲同學好衰，會取笑一些穿著沒潮流物品的同學，如果係我就會覺得自卑。)

FAY: But I think pursuing material goods is just part of the herd mentality: I must have what other people have, and I feel upset if others have something that I don't have. Though we are not rich that does not necessarily mean we can't own good stuff. It's just that we cannot afford to purchase whatever we want that freely. (不過我認為追求物質生活只不過係羊群心態，人有我有，人有我無就覺得唔舒服。我地雖然生活唔夠資源，但唔係唔可以有呢啲奢侈品，只不過係唔係隨時可以買，唔係可以有好多....)

All: Agreed. (係啦)

The group constructed a more complex interpretation of material possessions. In the eyes of the adolescents, such possessions did not simply fulfil a desire; they increased social status and ensure peer acceptance. Ying had a practical solution—to find an affordable substitute. Ching saw it as a matter of self-reliance; she would save the money if something was important to her. Fung described the lengths that some people go to acquire goods as "silly." Ying did confess that she would suffer if she were teased about her clothing. Still, the group all agreed with Fay when she said that they should not feel pressured by the need for conformity. It was better to pursue their independence and resist the herd mentality.

Through the group narrative, the adolescents showed they had a desire to achieve a certain standard of living. Kegan (1994) observes that parents convey their attitude toward materialism to their children and become their perceived social

expectation through socialization. As a result of parental influence or the direct experience of financial hardship, the adolescents used the terms "silly" and "immoral" to describe those who go to inappropriate lengths to acquire luxury items. They believed that if they wanted material goods, they should be prepared to find a way to get them themselves, without troubling their parents. Their attitude was very mature, but that does not mean that they did not suffer from the mental burden of resisting temptation.

6.3.4 Fighting temptation

Despite their maturity, the group did not always find it easy to overcome material temptation. The adolescents had to pay extra efforts to make out materialistic influences while seeking rational and legal strategies to meet their needs.

> *WKY: In that case, you also are affected by the temptation of material goods, how do you deal with it? (如果咁講，你地都會面對呢啲物質的引誘，咁樣你地點樣處理？)*
>
> *CHUN: Borrowing money to buy. (借錢去買)*
>
> *WAI: Buying some cheap goods instead of brand-name goods. (買一些便宜的東西代替名牌的物品。)*
>
> *NGA: Self-control, not buying so much, and not spending beyond my ability. (控制自己唔好買咁多、超出自己能力。)*
>
> *WAI: Not buying the latest famous-brand sneakers—the older models are much cheaper.... My mom will buy them during the Open Sale, and they only cost HK$ 200. (一對名牌的波鞋，不過唔係最新的，只是舊款...平好多。亞媽係啲"開倉"買，要二百幾蚊。)*
>
> *YEUNG: Yes, that is another option. Though the style is from the last season, it is also famous-brand and not that expensive. We are smart consumers…. (係啦，其實有其他代替架嘛，呢啲雖然舊款，但都算是名廠，而且無咁貴，精名消費者.....)*

According to their narratives, the adolescents of the inquiry group admitted to have material wants and sought their own ways to fulfil the need. As we can see, they had to come up with creative solutions to deal with the difficulty of keeping up with

their peers: Chun suggested borrowing; Wai bought older less expensive models of brand-name items; and Wai decided to restrict his purchases to just a few very good items. Adolescents living in poverty must invest considerable effort to cope with material temptations. If they decided to try to attain certain possessions, they have to cut their daily expenses for basic needs. At the same time, they must conform to their family's attitude about consumerism. The conflict causes them psychological distress of losing a family relationship or peer acceptance.

> *WKY: Do you think you need brand-name sneakers? If you don't have them, what will you do? (你認為需要名牌波鞋？如果無會點？)*
>
> *WAI: I don't know!*
>
> *FUNG: My family (parents) always reminds me not to be greedy. One day, my father scolded my elder brother, who has a job, but does not get a high salary, for buying a mobile phone that was over HK$ 5000. It is beyond his purchasing ability and it's not something that we must have for everyday life! (我屋企(父母)成日都提我地唔好貪心，一次亞爸鬧我亞哥，佢出嚟做野，雖然唔多人工，但買左個五千幾蚊的電話，根本都唔屬於你架野...要死慳死底先去買到一樣野，又唔可以當飯食!)*

Fung was taught to interpret any consumption beyond that meeting basic need as unacceptable. The story of her brother showed clearly the kind of tension that can arise when a child's desires conflicts with parental values. Fung herself took the route identified by Gilligan (1982) and strove to maintain family harmony at all costs. Their narrative illustrated how family influenced adolescents' value and interpretation of materialism.

> *WAI: The humanities subjects in school taught us the importance of self-control and the ability of telling right from wrong. (學校都有教過道德堂都係咁講，學會自我控制同分辨對錯。)*
>
> *WKY: Do you accept what's being taught by your family and school? (屋企同學校有教你地，你地會接受嗎？)*
>
> *NGA: I accept it but not because the teaching is reasonable; it's because I really don't have money. I have to accept it. I have to live with it. And I don't think it is worth committing a crime for the sake of buying luxury*

goods! (其實唔係有無理由問題，而是真係無錢買，唔接受也要接受...況且，我認為要買一啲名牌而去犯法，咁我就覺得唔值!)

YEUNG: It would be huge if I committed a crime... my mom would go crazy! She would cry, scold, and nag at me all day for a long time! (衰左好大件事，唔通激死亞媽...被佢鬧到不見天日!)

CHING: I have become used to that. My family and I have similar beliefs. (習慣左，自己也同屋企人教的差不多。)

WING: I need to learn to be content after talking with my family. (跟屋企人講完自己也要明白，也要學會知足。)

Besides family socialization, the adolescents also received the similar message of not being greedy from their teachers. Studies in the humanities, as Wai points out, encouraged them to be content with what they had. They were taught to view materialism as discontented and greedy. Their teachers really took a moral stand against the undue influence of materialism. The group constructed that it would be wrong to pursue luxurious consumption without considering the affordability. Therefore, the adolescents were expected to make the right decision by not demanding materialistic lifestyles.

CHING: Sometimes when I participate in volunteer services and get to know many more people who live in situations similar to mine or even worse, I feel it's easier to change my mind and exert self-control. (不過有時去做下義工，當了解到有許多人都有著同樣情況，甚至更慘時，咁都可以幫到自己調節心態架)

YING: Control yourself. Don't think about goods. (控制自己, 不去想該物品)

WING: Have you tried but failed? (咁你地有無試過做唔到？)

CHING: No. I know very well about our financial condition. It would not be reasonable to spend a lot of money on luxury goods and leave the whole family without any food. The brand-name goods are never basic necessities. (咁又無喎，我地都算係好明白自己的經濟能力，唔通買完啲貴野自己成家唔食飯? 始終我都唔認為係必需的。)

FUNG: Actually, we need to remind ourselves from time to time not to think about material goods, and also not to compare ourselves with others. Our families work very hard, how could we spend money on unnecessary stuff?

(其實要不時提醒自己唔好去想，亦唔好同人去比較，因為我地屋企人搵錢也很辛苦，點會花係啲'無謂'上。)

The discussion revealed the role of family and school in helping adolescents combat the temptations of a materialistic lifestyle. In Gilligan's theory of relational dilemma (1982), they should put family relationships as their highest priority even in materialistic pursuit. Ching and Ying both mention the self-control required to master their desire to buy. Ching noted that it was unreasonable to spend money on food that could be used to feed the family. Fung reminded the group of their earlier discussion of personal happiness and the need to avoid coveting what others have. As noted, it is apparent that the influence of materialism increases with age. The younger members of the group such as Yeung were still strongly influenced by their parents and teachers' negative views of a materialistic lifestyle. These teachings were abstract and moral, stressing the value of utility and not succumbing to greed. Older members of the group such as Nga experienced the problems of temptation more directly, and saw more clearly how certain goods ensure peer acceptance and bolster self-confidence.

Undoubtedly, the group narrative revealed that the adolescents pursued material possession not only for monetary value, but also in hopes to attain self-confidence, and to earning peer acceptance. They reiterated that consumer goods had to be functional and practical. Such inclination suppressed their desire for luxury items. With only abstract principles to guide them, the adolescents would find difficult to cope with the social expectation (Kegan, 1994) and resist the temptations of materialism.

6.4 Discussion of the struggle to address the mental burden of materialism

Through the group construction, the adolescents had their own interpretation of their experience under the influence of materialism. They recognized material possessions became necessary and a normal demand disregard of individuals' social

economic background. The adolescents in this study clearly supported Kegan's (1994) theory: they had internalized societal expectations concerning material goods from the influential people in their life—their parents and their peers. The younger adolescents could temporarily accept a non-material lifestyle according to their family's expectations, but the older ones suffered from the mental burden of trying to balance their allegiance to their peers and to their families. Depending solely on family's value, the adolescents were not competent to handle these influences in the materialistic world. Therefore, they must shoulder additional burdens. Specifically, they must:

- accept an alternative set of values that does not reflect the materialistic culture; and,
- rely on personal efforts to cope with material desires

6.4.1 Accepting an alternative set of values

Adolescents living in poverty must consider their consumer behaviour thoughtfully every day. Comparing to their peers, the adolescents had to accept a different value to possess material items. Keagan (1994) points out that parents have an enormous influence on their children's personalities and beliefs. As the narration of the inquiry group, the adolescents mentioned that their parents counselled them to buy goods that are durable, not wasteful, and inexpensive. Moreover, their teachers and parents condemned a materialistic lifestyle as greedy, immoral, and envious. They had to teach their children to suppress the desire and manage the wants. Consequently, the adolescents had been taught that they should exercise self-control and to stop comparing themselves with others.

Certainly, the adolescents in the group had imbibed parental values. While their parents' point of view might offer some consolations, the extra demands of parental expectations made it more difficult for adolescents to sort out the claims of personal needs, family obligations, and peer pressure. Youth living in poverty are urged to be self-denying but are rarely provided any practical skills, knowledge, or coping

strategies to resist material desires. The adolescents had to accept the simple or non-materialistic lifestyle, simultaneously, but also felt the pressure from their peers under the influence of materialistic culture. This was obviously extra demand to the adolescents without any supports.

6.4.2 Relying personal efforts to fulfil material desires

Ridge (2002) observes that Western adolescents enter into a complex series of financial negotiations with their families: when they talk about asking for money from their parents, they reveal a subtle understanding of their parents' financial situations. Chinese adolescents do not negotiate with their families like Western adolescents: they are more obedient and their parents, more authoritarian. Most of the group members would use their own means to fulfil their material desires instead of seeking support from their families.

According to Moschis and Moore's (1982) analysis, some adolescents would suppress their desire for materialism in order to maintain harmony among family members and avoid conflict. As a result, they have to rely on their own ability to satisfy their limited material needs. Some, like Nga, are ready to jeopardize their health and skip meals in order to get what they desire. Such extreme measures are necessary because poor adolescents have virtually no other means of obtaining money. Moreover, even these measures are insufficient given the increasingly demanding consumer culture. If without their family support, they might not have the knowledge and competence to meet with the social expectation.

6.5 Discussion of the social and cultural values and beliefs guiding adolescents' interpretation of materialism

The social constructionists (e.g., Gergen, 1985; Midgley, 1999) argue that any understanding of the world is the product of people responding to the continuously

changing cultural and historical background of their concrete situation. In this study, a number of cultural influences have been observed. In addition to the influence of capitalism, the Chinese value of "Mian Zi" (face work, 面子) shaped the adolescents' interpretation of material possession.

6.5.1 Pursuing brand-name products

The materialistic influence alters people's living style, choices, and behaviour. Materialism is essential for satisfaction and well-being in life and guides people's choices in many spheres, not only consumption (Richins & Dawson, 1990). "Social influence" refers to the effect that others have on an individual's behaviour (Ang et al., 2001). The group narratives demonstrate how the existing ideology of materialism influenced the adolescents' thinking. Brand names have a special function. As Wai and Nga observed, brand name items are not simply expensive items; they are status symbols. How did the adolescents form their values about material and consumption? People who are exposed to materialistic values through popular culture are more likely to accept them through modelling (Bandura, 1971) and internalization (Ryan & Connell, 1989).

Materialism provides a meaning to life by offering tangible achievements followed by the endless pursuit of a better lifestyle through consumption (Fox & Lears, 1983). It has been shown that television, advertising, and family communication play a significant role in stimulating the materialistic tendency in adolescents (Vega & Donald, 2011; O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997). With few opportunities to socialize, adolescents living in poverty often watch television in their leisure time (Ward & Wackman, 1971). The adolescents narrated their awareness of 'getting a basic living standard' while still having a desire to possess the material items in financial distress. The brand-name goods had more than a pragmatic value: peer acceptance and bolster self-confidence. It is not surprising that the adolescents in this study were rooted in the material and consumer culture, and had grown to view luxury items as basic necessities.

6.5.2 Chinese culture and the influence of materialism

The narrative of the adolescents showed that they were concerned with social relation with their peer when possessing the material items. Nga worried that his schoolmates would tease him if he were wearing old-fashioned shoes. Fung chose a trendy brand and model so that he could feel included by his peers. The members of the group associated the good feeling of possessing brand-name items with a "sense of beauty" (靚), "pride" (榮耀), and "fame" (聲名). Zhao (1997) maintains that mass consumption in Chinese society is different from that in the West because of the long-standing values associated with families and human relationships. Purchasing a brand-name item is not simply a monetary or pragmatic decision. It confers a feeling of privilege and "Mian Zi" (face work 面子).

The teachings of Confucianism make comparisons of class and social status inevitable. Comparisons of possessions are encouraged as a way to identify an individual's position in the social hierarchy. In the local setting, the Chinese cultural beliefs of 'personal achievement' also influenced adolescents' attitudes. They believed that possessions were symbols of success and the centre of life. It also reinforced the belief that more possessions led to more happiness (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998; Hu, 1944). The collective characteristics of Chinese culture encourage adolescents to consider material possessions as representations of social status and establishment. Understanding how materialism and social relationships interact with the traditional Chinese perspective will provide new insights into youths' views of consumerism.

6.5.3 The developmental stage of peer identity

Bachmann et al. (1993) recognized that peers have a very powerful influence over adolescents' consumer behaviour. Middleton et al. (1994) similarly found that the desire to acquire certain material items reflects not just the "common culture of acquisition" but also a form of communication among youth (Willis, Jones, Canaan, & Hurd, 1990). For further analysis, Moore & Moschis (1981) reveals that the

middle or senior adolescents, who communicate less frequently with their parents about consumption, are found to be more materialistic. On the contrary, early adolescents' communication with their parents demonstrates lower levels of materialism.

In this study, some of the senior members of the group learned about their peers' preferences and modelled after their behaviours. One of the members of group, Ching, noted that by owning luxury items could be spared teasing or the embarrassment of standing out in the crowd or peer group (至少唔會擔心俾佢地指指點點). Wai commented that friends purchase "the same item to show unity"(同學間一齊買友情信物). Voices from the group expressed experiences of feeling comforted and less anxious while wearing their brand-name sneakers in social activity with their schoolmates. According to Moschis and Moore's (1982) explanations, these material possessions represented their friendship and ways to cultivate social relationships with peer and friends.

6.6 Discussion of the collaborative inquiry process

In discussing the adolescents' daily living experience, the young member of the group, Yeung, mentioned his recent experience of buying a pair of inexpensive sneakers. I had an internal voice of questioning how Yeung's topic was relevant to the inquiry process. As Greenwood and Levin (1998 & 2005) stated, I had to recognize the adolescents' capability to develop their own ideas and to contribute to the analysis by discussing their perceptions of the meaning and experience of poverty.

Collaborative inquiry emphasizes the "researched 'with' rather than 'on' people" and concerned the lived experience of people and the understanding of the essences of reality (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Therefore, I encouraged Yeung to elaborate more about his personal experience with the groups. He viewed sneakers functionally and pragmatically, and did not care about brand-name. However, other group members, especially Nga and Fay, showed strong preference to brand-name products.

Some were even willing to forsake basic daily expenses in order to save up for luxury items. Most of the group agreed that certain luxury items are actually necessities in their milieu. Only Yeung remained skeptical throughout the inquiry process.

The adolescents' own meaning and interests were at the centre of the research process. Under the discussion atmosphere of the group, members might tend to elaborate more details of their experience in poverty. However, I did not take this opportunity to facilitate the adolescents' voices and to enrich their understanding of the feeling and experience under the influence of materialism. Instead, I directed the group narration to the discussion of coping strategies. In Nga's view, he should save up his meal money in order to purchase brand-name items. Some of the others would rather suppress or delay their desire towards materialistic items. The diverse voices on dealing with the material needs were collected in the group. Collaborative inquiry could encourage the adolescents to come up with different ways of coping with their difficulties (Brooks & Watkins, 1994).

During the inquiry process, the adolescents upheld different values and solutions in assessing consumption items. The voices from the both sides were elaborated in the inquiry process. The older members of the group recognized the influence of peer pressure as a burden on their purchasing decisions. To meet peer expectations, Nga stressed that he would not ask his parents to buy things for him, but would find his own means of getting the money. For the junior members, like Yeung, they tended to accept the values of their families or parents toward material possessions. The different view between the senior and junior members was formed.

No matter how polarized their views were, the members of the group were allowed the space to clarify their thoughts through the collaborative process (Heron & Reason, 2001). Although the inquiry process gave them an opportunity to describe the meanings they associated with material goods, the group dynamic might have mutually influential effect through the adolescents' shared and reciprocal experiences

with others (Trevarthen, 2001). This was evident when the group collectively argued that luxury goods could be considered necessities. Eventually, Yeung was silenced by the consensus of the other members.

Once again, hearing the adolescents' stories about living in poverty, I discovered that I uphold the social work value of "helping the clients help themselves". I found I was walking a fine line: I wanted to gather information without providing input, but I also wanted to help them with their problems. Eventually, I redirected the group inquiry process by moving the group narration from discussing about their coping strategies to exploring their feelings of dealing with material temptations. I was also cautious about the issue of power imbalance within the group of the adolescents and I avoided taking control of the inquiry process.

6.7 Summary of the chapter

This chapter dealt with the adolescents' experience of materialism. The study extended the local understanding of the adolescents of living experience in poverty. With their limited resources, they had to make difficult choices between higher-priced, fashionable, brand-name goods and lower-price, durable, and pragmatic goods. Only the former would confer status among their peers.

For the adolescents, material goods not only fulfilled their intrinsic function but also acted as a means of satisfying peer pressure, staking one's identity, and gaining social status. In the further analysis, Chinese culture encouraged adolescents to see possessions as a measure of success, but parents and teachers warned against the temptations of materialism. These issues, which were difficult to navigate for all adolescents, were particularly difficult for those living in poverty. Mental burdens and challenges of adolescents were also caused by conflicting material values between their parents and peer.

Chapter 7: Striving to escape poverty

7.1 Introduction

Poverty is very difficult to eradicate. People living in poverty are anxious to escape it as soon as possible. Many studies have been conducted both generally and locally to determine the best social and economic strategies to reduce poverty (Ellis, 2000; Heckman, 2000; Ravallion, 2001). Most studies focus on the social and political repercussions of poverty; few deal with the individual experience of living in poverty. Moreover, the literature usually confines itself to the adult perspective: very little is devoted to the perceptions of children and youth. According to the group narration of the last inquiry sessions, the adolescents discussed the means of escaping poverty. According to their parents, education is a reliable vehicle of upward social mobility, which is bound to improve their living conditions. Education is an important factor in determining the nature of one's employment and one's place in the social hierarchy (Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). The general feeling is that poor people will have a better future if they acquire knowledge and skills through education.

The members of the group discussed the validity of an old expression — "Zhi Shi Gai Bian Ming Yun" (Knowledge changes fate, 知識改變命運). For them, "fate" referred to their life in poverty and "knowledge" referred to their education. From both their families and society at large, the adolescents learned that education plays a significant role in determining their future. A good education in Hong Kong, however, makes large psychological and financial demands. Due to the keen competition in the labour market, the adolescents felt that education alone would not guarantee them a well-paid job. Their financial limitations had made it difficult for them to access learning opportunities, which, in turn, lowered their chances to pursue higher education. The narrations of inquiry group gave us insight into that little-studied field.

In this chapter, I will provide a brief discussion of the current debate on escaping poverty through education, followed by a thematic analysis of the group's discussion of their hopes to escaping poverty. Through the social construction process, the adolescents shared their views on the possibility of escaping their lot through education. Again, their experiences led them to expect relational dilemmas and made them aware of parental and societal expectations. The mental burdens that they must shoulder in this regard are heavier than those of their more well-to-do peers. Finally, I will discuss the social and cultural beliefs and values that have influenced the group's views of the ways to escape poverty.

7.2 Escaping poverty through education

In Chinese societies, educational achievements are seen as a means to attain social status and wealth. A "successful" education is one that ensures upward social mobility; this idea is deeply rooted in families and in the general culture (Louie, 2004; Lien, 2006). Sociologists have long studied the socio-economic life cycle, focusing on the effects of family background, education, and employment. "Status confers prestige," and a well-regarded job is a measure of socio-economic status. Family background and education also contribute to socio-economic status. Education, however, is considered an intervening variable, determined in part by family background but also by independent effort. Regardless of their social status, children and youth commonly perceive education as an effective and reliable route to upward social mobility (Taylor & Nelms, 2006).

Contemporary sociological and political debate suggests that education has become an increasingly important factor in determining which jobs people enter and what social position they will attain (Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). Education is the crucial link between one's social background and class destination (Müller& Shavit, 1998). There have been only a few Hong Kong studies of poor children's social mobility. One was a quantitative study on mobility and intergenerational earnings in Hong Kong conducted by researchers from The Hong Kong Institute of Economics and Business Strategies of the University of Hong Kong under the auspices of the

Commission on Poverty. Its official conclusion was that education was a way to enhance upward social mobility and strengthen individuals' chances of escaping poverty (CoP, 2007). However, another recent study conducted by the Hong Kong Institute of Education (2013) reached a different conclusion. It found that children from poor families were 3.7 times less likely to receive a university education than those from families in the top 10% income bracket. Undoubtedly, there was a positive correlation between family income and enrolment in higher education, but the statistical findings, however, do not reflect the youth's subjective experiences of their efforts to escape poverty. What difficulties have they experienced that have affected their social mobility? Does the current discourse on the relationship between education and employment strike them as persuasive? Therefore, learning what adolescents think about escaping from poverty is an important step in helping them to do so.

7.3 Chance of escaping poverty

Despite the social and economic deprivations of their childhood, the adolescents still had hopes for their future. When the group was given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, they that dwelt on the belief that education was the key to escape poverty.

7.3.1 Education does not guarantee a better future

In a number of group sessions, the saying "Zhi Shi Gai Bian Ming Yun" (Knowledge changes fate, 知識改變命運) was repeated. Education was considered an effective mean to escape poverty. I asked the group, "Shall we talk about how you think about studying?" (不如大家也講下你地對讀書的睇法？).

> *NGA: Now, college students are everywhere.... Does it matter whether you get a bachelor, master, or PhD? There are too many... (依家周街都係大學生、碩士、 博士學位算得咩呢，通街都係....)*

YEUNG: I want to get into college... .I love studying... and my mom also told me to study is very important! (我都希望可以讀到大學...我鐘意讀書，另一方面亞媽也同我地講讀書好重要架!)

CHING: It is useful. We need to have a good foundation. I cannot get into a college, but I still need to find a job. Nowadays, having a degree does not guarantee a good job; but without a good education, it's guaranteed that we cannot get a job. (有用架，打好基礎先，因為入唔到大學也需要搵工，依家有學歷唔一定搵到好工，但無學歷就一定搵唔到工!)

CHUN: A good job? .... It's not a good job if the pay is not good. If the salary were only several thousand, you would need to apply for CSSA! (好工？搵到錢就係好工，唔通有份工就係得幾千蚊咩，仲要攞低收入綜援啦!)

FUNG: Isn't it true that education changes life? How come someone educated still needs to apply for CSSA?... (讀書唔係話可以改變命運咩? 讀完書都仲要攞綜援啦...)

NGA: There are too many university graduates now. I wouldn't necessarily get a good job even if I had the opportunity to go to college. I am not even sure that my life would be improved. (咁多人都係大學生，即使我地有機會讀到大學也未必可以搵到份好工，咁都唔敢話改善生活啦!)

Nga noted that the over-supply of university graduates in the current labour market has reduced the prestige of people with higher education. Together with Fung and Chan, he was sceptical of the belief that "Zhi Shi Gai Bian Ming Yun" (knowledge changes fate, 知識改變命運). Both Yeung and Ching disagreed. Yeung shared his parents' belief in the high value of education. Ching considered it "a good foundation" (打好基礎) for employment. Different voices could be heard in the inquiry process. The group narration process also encouraged the adolescents to determine what constituted their idea of a "good job." They did not dwell on whether a good job would be personally fulfilling or challenging. For Chun, it is a job that pays well. This is, of course, a major issue for adolescents living in poverty. A well-paying job would not only improve their family's living conditions but also rescue their family from the welfare system. This definition really questioned the common understanding of good job based on potential prosperity, personal interest, and learning.

NGA: Some of my friends say it's all about opportunity. If you get a job, then you start working; if you are admitted to a school, and then continue studying. It would be better to start working early to make money so as to help improve the family's condition right away. (我有啲朋友就講過，要等到有機會先？升到就升、讀到就讀，不如早啲返工賺錢好過，起碼即時改善到家計啦!)

CHING: Now, we are told to study hard, but actually, there is a slim chance of getting into college. (其實依家讀書只是叫人努力讀，但入到大學其實也很少人啦....)

WING: Do you believe knowledge can change your lives? (咁你地信唔信知識改變命運？)

YEUNG: I believe it because I like studying. In addition, there is no need to start working at this moment! (我就信架，因為我鍾意讀書，而且依家都唔洗理做野先!)

NGA: I believe education can improve our lives but not directly, as we need to find a good job after graduation and wait for opportunities. It's so competitive now. So what people said in the old days—"Knowledge change fate"—is outdated and might not be totally correct. I believe it's fifty-fifty. (我信讀書可以改善生活，不過不是直接，仲要我地讀完書搵到份好工，然之後等機會，不過依家競爭咁大，所以以前啲人講「知識改變命運」都未必啱!所以我就覺得一半半啦!)

Nga felt frustration and thought it was misleading to suggest that education would guarantee a better life. Ching agreed: she knew that no matter how diligently she studied, her chances of getting into university were slim. The views of Nga and Ching, once again, seem to reflect peer rather than parental pressure. However, Yeung expressed his trust in his mother's view of the importance of education. Although it posed a relational dilemma (Gilligan, 1982) with the other group members, Yeung had the courage to assert his opinion and oppose the majority view. The inquiry process identified the adolescents to get the influence simultaneously from parents and peers in the interpretation of the belief of "Zhi Shi Gai Bian Ming Yun" (Knowledge changes fate 知識改變命運).

7.3.2 The role of the market

Although the adolescents found the litter chance to escape poverty, they were struggling to find any possible ways of improving their future lives. The group of the adolescents recognized that the labour market was an important factor in their attempts to escape poverty.

> *NGA: All college students major in one specified subject, so they do not know things about other majors unless it is a professional degree. The labour market does not need employees with a general major. You need to have some professional skills to get hired. (大學生全部都係專一一行架嘛!咁其他都係唔識架!除非係個啲專業啦，如果只是普通個啲術科畢業，根本唔係依家需要嘅職員咁...係要有幾種技能)*
>
> *WAI: The professional skills do not include academic subjects like Chinese, English, or mathematics. You have to get certified technical skills to work as a technician in a power plant or waterworks. (唔係中、英、數呢啲，即係學下其他技能，考下証書...例如水電泥水都要。)*
>
> *FUNG: In fact, technicians can earn above ten thousand. (咁其實啲人工都有萬幾蚊!)*
>
> *WAI: The salary is similar to college graduates'. (其實同大學生的人工差唔多!)*
>
> *WKY: It is because different jobs require different sets of skills: technicians need technical skills and teachers need the knowledge to teach students...? (可能係根本唔同工作要求，技工就要技術，教師就要識教人一樣...?)*
>
> *YING: In fact, the salary starting point of an ordinary college graduate is the same as that of a Form Six graduate. (其實依家普通大學生畢業同一個中六畢業的起薪點都係一樣。)*
>
> *CHING: There are lots of degrees, diplomas, and courses, but many are not even acknowledged. Little is known about the subjects and the courses, and people do not know what kind of job they can get after graduation. Because some people do not want to start working early, they continue studying to get a degree. (好似依家真係好多副學士學位及文憑課程。但跟本都唔承認，而且啲科目都唔知係咩，讀左也搵唔到工，只是啲人唔想咁早出來做野，讀埋啲副學士學位。)*

Nga and Wai felt that it was the state of the labour market, rather than education, that was the prime determinant in employment. Fung, Ying, and Ching agreed that it

is better to acquire the specialized knowledge demanded by labour market. They pointed out that skilled technicians earn as much as university graduates. However, Ching expressed some frustration about the difficulties of navigating course selections and career planning. Overall, the adolescents experienced not only having less opportunities of higher education, but also no guarantee of a better future. Therefore, they conveyed a sense of hopelessness. They could not control their future or identify feasible ways to escape poverty. The value of a university degree has depreciated, so they felt vocational training might offer more opportunities. Still, they were not optimistic.

> *NGA: Hong Kong used to have industry. However, you cannot find a job if you take any course related to the industry now, unless you work in Mainland China. (香港以前有工業，依家你讀左任何工業有關課程都入唔到行啦，除非返大陸啦啦!)*
>
> *YING: There are a lot of college graduates, but there are not many job openings. Believe it or not! Experience is necessary to get an opportunity! I don't know why people only tell me to study hard, but never mention the reality in society [i.e., that academic degrees do not guarantee a job]. (因為而家都有好多大學生畢業,不過都唔係好多位(職位)，信唔信!有機會，不過經驗緊要啲!唔知點解啲人只識諗住叫我要讀書呀，唔識提到社會咩情況 (有學歷但沒有職位)。)*
>
> *CHING: I believe that. The situation may not have shown much improvement, but it will not be worse. (我信,不過就唔一定會有很大的改善，只會係唔會差落去囉。)*
>
> *WAI: Nowadays, a lot of college graduates only earn several thousand a month and most of them are salespersons. If you are really good at school and get a degree in professional programs, you can get a job as lawyer, accountant, doctor, engineer, or teacher.... Otherwise, you don't have any advantages in the competition. (其實依家好多大學生也只得幾千蚊人工，大部份都去做左 SALES(售貨員)...除非你係讀啲勁野，好似做律師、會計、醫生....工程，唔係教書都可以...其他就都一樣同其他人爭)*

Due to the recent economic depression in Hong Kong, the unemployment rate has increased while salaries have fallen. The labour market is now highly competitive and, as Nga observed, there may be opportunities in Mainland China, but

there are very few in Hong Kong. Ying pointed out that now work experience has become more important than educational qualifications. As students, the group did not have direct experience of macroeconomic pressure, but their parents would certainly have felt the strain and passed their message to their children through their daily interaction.

Moreover, Wai observed that the current conditions did not favour adolescents living in poverty. The better jobs require intensive training, which is beyond the means of poor children. Due to financial limitations, they were less likely to excel because of poor social background and connections. Therefore, the adolescents interpreted that the current labour market has made it very difficult for poor adolescents to improve their lot.

> WKY: Do you believe education can change lives? (所以你地信唔信讀書可以改變生活?)
>
> YEUNG: Certainly, the purpose of studying is to make a good living... at least to have some basic knowledge and meet basic requirements. (讀書係好清楚即係為左生活好，而起碼都基本上有一定的學識，基本需要麻。)
>
> CHING: I don't always agree that studying is good though my mom always told me to study hard. What they do not know is that it's already very hard to study at school, not to mention extra-curricular activities and tutoring. If we get into college, we have to take on big loans that need to be paid back right after graduation. So how could education improve our lives? (我一向不贊成讀書好，雖然亞媽成日叫我要讀書..但佢地都唔知讀到書已經好難，仲要咩野活動、又要補習，唔係咁易。讀到入大學又要欠一筆錢，畢業就要還錢，所以點會改變到生活嗎?)
>
> YEUNG: I won't think about that now. I just study first. Because at least I have a chance! (我無諗咁多，讀書先，因為至少都有個機會架啦!)
>
> FUNG: There are just too many college students; they're everywhere now. (咁依家周街都係大學生，跌個招牌都責死幾十個啦。)
>
> WAI: In the past, social mobility occurred through education and hard work. The system was fair: as I said, if I studied hard, I could find a good job. Everyone looks for a better living, but if you don't have money, there is no way to climb the social ladder now. (以前啦，係書本理解係咁,透過讀書，透過自己努力、勤力做野都可以向上流動到；依家就係講緊公平

嘅意思係,好似我咁講呀，我透過努力讀書，我可以搵份好工，人望高處，你係無左向上流動的階級,根本就你係無錢。)

CHUN: Sometimes it's okay to believe that studying hard will be useful and the efforts will be repaid. (咁有時也可以信下讀得好就有用，讀唔好就無用。)

After listening to the others, Yeung insisted to follow his family's value but adjusted his view of the value of education: now he felt it would help maintain, but not necessarily improve, his living conditions. Similar to the Yeung's response under the group pressure, Ching thought education was important but was no guarantee of a better quality of life or an escape from poverty. Her mother wanted her to study diligently but did not understand the possible negative impact of insufficient resources. If Ching went to university, she would have to go into debt, a prospect that she feared.

Wai tried to conclude their interpretation about the value of education. He found sceptical of parents teaching on belief that "Zhi Shi Gai Bian Ming Yun" (Knowledge changes fate, 知識改變命運). No matter what they thought, still had to behave as their parents expected: "studying hard". As Gilligan (1982) claims, the adolescents recognized the importance of family relations and avoided any disappointment to their parents.

7.3.3 "Man proposes but God disposes"

During the group inquiry process, the adolescents made a deep reflection on their living. The expression "Mou Shi Zai Ren, Cheng Shi Zai Tian" (man proposes but God disposes, 成事在天謀事在人) conveys a fatalistic attitude that was evident in the group.

WKY: You have mentioned that college graduates cannot find a job. Studying cannot help you to get out of poverty. It's half and half, so you still believe 50% of it.... What part do you believe and what part you do not believe? You'd like to understand? (你頭先話大學生，依家都搵唔到工啦! 讀書

都脫唔到貧啦，一半半，咁有一半你依然相信；或者，邊啲你係信？邊啲你唔信?唔緊要，你都要理解?)

WING: Sometimes, in addition to studying, I want myself to be lucky. I wish myself luck in studying now and I wish myself luck in finding a good job in the future. (不過有時諗讀書之餘也會想自己好運啲...依家望讀書好運啲...將來望好運啲搵到好工啦!)

YEUNG: I think studying is most important and it is the only thing I can do for now.... Maybe I will get lucky if I perform well at school; so I believe studying can change lives. (我就覺得讀書最重要，亦到係我可以做到的... 可能好彩我讀書都幾好，所以我信讀書可以改變命運架...)

Several of the group narrations conveyed that the adolescents had very little confidence in their ability to escape poverty through personal efforts. According to Kluegal, Mason, and Wegener's (1995) description, individuals held themselves personally responsible for the existence of poverty. For instance, Wing maintained that she had to rely on luck. Nga lost his faith in education because of his own bad experiences at school. He too believed that he needed luck to achieve better prospects. However, only Yeung put his trust in education, but even he attributed good academic performance to luck. Due to the group pressure to Yeung, he had to make a moral choice to maintain the relationships with the group instead of asserting his opinions (Gilligan, 1982). Scholars have noted that poor individuals often see their situation as beyond their control, something that happened because of bad luck or God's will (Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

The rapid change and development in Hong Kong's education system has increased the demands on all the students. Students are expected to participate in more extracurricular activities, educational trips, and high-tech learning opportunities. For the adolescents living in poverty, these opportunities were, in fact, burdens. They were unable to afford these extra learning experiences and were, therefore, in a weaker position academically than those who could. Therefore, without any additional help, the adolescents should not be able to cope with this social expectation (Kegan, 1994).

WKY: What topic do you want to talk about now? (咁你想大家講咩?)

SHU: Let's talk about our future! Is it critical to have luck before we can change our destiny? (其實不如講下將來會係點呀!係咪真係要行運先可以改變到?)

NGA: Okay, let's talk about this topic. We can talk about anything! So what do you think about your future? (咁試下講都無所謂,咁耐大家講咩都得架啦! 咁你自己點睇將來先!)

SHU: Of course, I want to live a better life! Have more money, so the family does not have to keep track of daily expenses. (我當然想可以生活好一啲! 有多一啲錢,唔洗一家人要每日計住住咁生活!)

Shu's mother urged her to study diligently, so she was torn when she heard other members of the group maintain the personal efforts cannot guarantee a better future. She assumed that all the group would want to have a better and healthier lifestyle, where they would no longer have to keep close track of their daily expenses. She was confused about their future and relational dilemmas (Gilligan, 1982) between the theme of the group and her mother's expectation.

CHUN: So, first fate, second luck, third "fung-shui," and fourth education. This saying mentions fate and luck. Fifty per cent of success is due to capability and 50% is due to human effort. "Man proposes but God disposes." I believe education may offer a chance to get out of poverty, but it is not for sure! (咁「一命二運三風水四讀書」提出命運,一半實力一半事在人為,成事在天謀事在人,我覺得讀書可以脫貧的機會,不過唔夠係一定得!)

WAI: Fate is also important if we want to get out of poverty. (命運都係對我地脫貧幾緊要)

CHUN: Money is of course a must. To get out of poverty means we have no need for CSSA and sufficient income for our expenditures. (當然係要有錢啦,而脫貧就係唔洗要攞綜援,同埋真係有好的收入!夠係一定得!)

In the following narration, Chun advocated to the group with the idioms 'First is fate, second is luck, the third is 'Fung-shui' and then fourth is a study'(一命二運三風水四讀書.. 第四先係讀書) and 'Mou Shi Zai Ren, Çheng Shi Zai Tian' (Man proposes but God disposes 謀事在人,成事在天). Although most members of the

group did not entirely dismiss the effects of education, many showed a willingness to surrender to fate. Getting out of poverty was the important thing, and that required money. In the eyes of the adolescents, having 'money' meant the possibility of getting out of poverty.

> WAI: It doesn't matter, I believe in luck but that doesn't mean I do not study hard. (無所謂，我信彩數唔代表我唔讀書。)
>
> WKY: Do others think is important to get out of poverty? (咁樣其他人認為脫貧要靠咩？)
>
> CHUN: Education may not necessarily guarantee your being able to get out of poverty, but at least it offers a chance. Half and half. Everyone has a reservation about this belief. (讀書唔一定脫到貧,但有機會脫到貧,一半半呀。一半半,大家都這個神話到有所保留。)
>
> WKY: That means people believe in luck! (即係都係信運)
>
> WAI: Family members always remind us to study hard, that it promises us a good future. (屋企人係咁叫讀好啲書就可以有好將來，其他野就唔洗理啦!)
>
> SHU: Based on their [i.e., parents'] experiences, they expect us to follow the same path to get a better living! (所以佢地知道行過啲條路咁好啲,就叫你行囉!)

Wai and Chun repeated to express their sceptical attitude about the effects of education. Their voices did not suppress the other minor voices. Shu showed understanding of her parents' advice to work hard because they believed education was the best way for them to improve their future. Parents demanded adolescents to study diligently, with the hopes that it would lead to a better future. Shu did not challenge the majority view in order to preserve the harmonious relationship with other group members (Gilligan, 1982). It is clear that the adolescents had a difficult time determining whether personal effort or luck would be definitive in determining their future.

7.3.4 Struggling with fate

Unexpectedly, the adolescents could hold their courage to overcome the anticipated difficulties to escape poverty. They were struggling to find out their way of improving their future.

CHUN: You're good at studying, but there are many other factors that may play a role, such as social connections, opportunities, etc. In fact, we need to depend on luck sometimes. (你識得讀,但亦需要更多其他野的影響,人際關係、機會等等。呢啲其實都要靠下運氣架。)

CHING: Sometimes people talked about how to break out of intergenerational poverty. It would be very difficult to do so depending solely on individual effort…. If the government does not offer any help, what can we depend on? We cannot simply rely on education… and assume we will live a good life after graduation…. It's really not that easy. Sometimes we see a lot of people praying to the gods and going to see a fortune teller, and that makes me think maybe luck is that important for us… (有時人地講點解打破跨代貧窮,如果只是靠自己就有啲困難…政府唔做野,咁仲可以靠咩,唔通真係以為靠依家讀書…畢業就會有好境…其實都幾困難 …. 有時見到咁多人都去求神問卜、就會諗真係要靠下運氣先可以改變到命運。)

SHU: Sometimes I really admire my friends. They were born to good families, and that's what we call luck. (有時也會羨慕啲朋友的屋企,一出世就有唔錯的屋企環境,呢啲咪叫做好運囉!)

NGA: In the old days when there was no mandatory 12-year education, a child was allowed to work legally at the age of 12. Starting work early helps us save more money and get out of poverty sooner. (以前真係無左 12 年教育限制嘅話, 12 歲就可以出嚟做野。早啲出嚟做野係可以脫到貧,因為至少早啲儲到錢!)

CHING: That's true. But we cannot work at that young age now! (咁真係喎,不過依家點可以咁細個出來做野喎!)

NGA: To get out of poverty means to make money. (不過諗脫貧就即係諗搵錢。)

With a sense of their own impotency, the adolescents demanded a systemic change: policy changes had a better chance of improving their future than personal or family efforts. Although Ching was the first person to mention the responsibility of institutional systems regarding problems of poverty, she still did not express any

confidence in the effects of human effort, even that of the government. Shu and Nga also experienced the conflict of asserting personal effort, but not knowing if it would result to improve their future. To break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, it was sad to hear that the adolescents felt they had to be pragmatic. Nga argued it was best to begin working as soon as possible, rather than pursue higher education.

WKY: The government can help you get out of poverty? (政府幫到大家脫貧嗎?)

YEUNG: The government gives out money; each person gets HK$10,000, "Money kept by the citizens." (政府派錢，每人派一萬蚊"藏富於民")

FUNG: There are lots of external forces that we need to depend on in order to improve the lives of our families. (其實真係要靠好多外在因素去令到自己家庭狀況有所改善。)

CHUN: There are no jobs in the market. The news reports that a lot of college graduates cannot get a job. My family always taught me that studying hard will get you a good job. But it is not easy to earn a living...! (係出面真係搵唔到工喎，新聞報導大學生搵唔到工喎!由細到大亞媽亞爸屋企人都提我地讀書係可以將來搵份好工，但真係唔係咁易搵到食....!)

FUNG: Even though you work hard, you may not be able to make a living. A lot of Hong Kong people work long hours, like my parents—they work non-stop. Sometimes we blame destiny, which actually makes me feel better! (依家你努力都未必搵到食，幾多香港人也是長時間做野、我地爸媽都做唔停，咁咪一樣!有時賴下條命唔夠好都會令自己好過啲!)

WKY: It seems that you all don't believe you can make a change by your own efforts? (似乎大家都唔相信單靠自己嘅力量係改變唔到)

NGA: Those who think they can, please raise their hands! (相信單靠一己之力係改變(脫唔到貧)就舉手!)

YEUNG: How about we don't study? Are we going get good grades simply due to good luck? (唔通唔考試溫書，等運到成績會好咩？)

NGA: Though people say we need to have self-confidence and rely on our own selves to make changes, it is easy to say.... My academic performance is just so-so... and it cannot be improved instantly. When I was young, I believed that I could rely on myself. However, as I grow older, I become more practical and realistic... and I don't believe in myself anymore. (雖然啲人講要對自己有信心及靠自己雙手去改變，但並唔係'講咁易'...成績真係麻麻，咁點可以即時可以幫到我手...我細個時也會信靠自己，但係人愈大就愈現實...不能夠再靠自己。)

The major group was more inclined to attribute their situation to "fate". Nga became the spokesman of the group's doubts about escaping poverty through personal effort. However, Yeung, though young, had the courage to assert his opposing view and concurred with employing personal effort to improve the future. Nga indirectly attributed Yeung's attitude to his younger age; he said that he too felt more confident about his own efforts when he was younger.

> *SHU: It's predestined. If you are poor, you will be in poverty your whole life. Even though you work very hard day and night, the family situation will stay the same. (即係宿命嚟嘅,你係窮就成世窮!如果只係靠自己日揰夜揰,如估唔係唔得,不過真係同依家屋企一樣咁。)*
> *WAI: We need to have a good job, and gradually, things will get better and more stable! (有份好工、慢慢做都應該可以安安穩穩!)*
> *FAY: The poor are always the poor; it seems there is no change. The government has always claimed that they help people get out of poverty, but that is not an easy task. We do not even dare to think about it. There must be good intentions, but I don't have much confidence. If you ask college graduates from low-income families, they are not confident enough to say that they will be able to improve their current living conditions. (窮人就係窮人,就好似無得變。所以政府講或者幫人脫貧,唔係真係咁易,我地都唔敢咁快諗,當然一定有希望,但唔係咁有信心。即使你問下依家來自基層的大學生,佢地都唔敢講可以改善生活條件啦!)*

Nga's comments left Shu and Chun feeling disheartened. Shu described her living conditions as "predestined"—imposed and unchangeable. Fay still held a wish but less confidence to get out of poverty. Their vision of a good future was humble and simple—"We need to have a good job, and gradually, things will get better and stable" (有份好工、慢慢做都應該可以安安穩穩!)—but still this seemed beyond their grasp. The adolescents living in poverty struggled not only with daily deprivations but also with a sense of helplessness with regard to their future.

In conclusion, the adolescents experienced socio-economic deprivation, but suffered feelings of frustration and helplessness in changing their future. Considering

the social situation, high unemployment rate and low salary level reinforced adolescents' hesitation in believing their chances of escaping poverty through education. There was the dilemma between their own voices and their parents' expectation which became burdensome to the adolescents.

7.4 Discussion of the mental burdens associated with escaping poverty

Through the group construction process, the adolescents were able to express their anxieties about the future. According to Kegan's (1994) description, parents highly influenced their children and conditioned them to form their practice and belief. Their parents and teachers, and society as a whole, had taught them that education was the means to escape poverty. However, the adolescents lacked learning resources and opportunities, and grew sceptical about the efficacy of personal efforts to escape poverty.

Undoubtedly, the local society expects welfare recipients to leave the welfare system and work their way out of poverty. Certainly, the adolescents in this study hoped to improve the lives of their families and free them from welfare dependency. Based on their interactions between themselves and their living environment (Kegan, 1982), the adolescents recognized the social expectation and had to develop their competence. However, their sense of responsibility created a heavy burden. They shouldered the expectations of

- striving for future success; and,
- bearing the responsibility for their family's welfare.

7.4.1 Striving for future success

Poverty limits the chances of educational attainment, but educational attainment paradoxically is one of the prime mechanisms for escaping poverty. The parents of the group members reinforced the belief that higher education brings

prestige. As a result, the adolescents were obliged to study diligently, though they believed that their chances of pursuing a higher education were very slim. They were also experiencing difficulties with their study, such as less learning opportunities and social activities. Their doubts extended to the benefits of education. Nga maintained that a university degree education no longer guarantee prestige or success in the current labour market, and improve his future living condition.

In Nga's narrative, he found that the intensity of such expectation increased as he grew up. The imbalance between parent's demand and adolescents' availability of resources produced an insolvable burden for adolescents at their critical stage of development. Kegan (1994) argues that adolescents should not blame their parents for failing to meet their needs. The adolescents in this study were confused and anxious not to disappoint their parents. Still the disconnect between their parents' expectations and the reality of labour market placed an intolerable burden on the group. Undoubtedly, the adolescent would feel inadequate and unconfident to strive for their future success without their parents' support.

7.4.2 Assuming responsibility for the family's welfare

According to the group narration, the adolescents always mentioned that they had to to improve the lives of their families. As Chun Chun pointed out that it was assumed that she would do well academically and then be able to help her entire family escape poverty. Chinese culture values collectivism, which is a defining characteristic of family relationships (Lu & Shih, 1997). While it usually assumed that parents provide protection and support for their children, the children in poor families are often seen as the means to better the family's prospects (Ho, 1994; Lam, 1997; Meredith et al., 1989). The adolescents saw themselves as part of a collective. As Fung observed, their primary aim was "to improve the lives of our families" (...令到自己的家庭狀況有所改善。).

Chinese culture encourages children to increase the prosperity of their family (Lu & Shih, 1997; Miller & Yang, 1997). Escaping poverty was a big task for the

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whole family instead of an individual responsibility. The adolescents in this study put familial goals before their own personal goals. Their achievement was a representation of the effort of the entire family and their success. Being responsible for their entire family's well-being was a heavy burden and one they felt unable to shoulder.

7.5 Discussion of the social and cultural values guiding adolescents' choices of escaping poverty

Social situations depend on the interplay of actors and context (Gergen, 1985; Midgley, 1999). The adolescents in this study knew of the socially and culturally prescribed ways to escape poverty. The adolescents had a strong sense of the Chinese culture in which they considered education as a crucial means of climbing up the social ladder. The Chinese belief in the value of education and capitalist belief in the importance of self-reliance were highly influential.

7.5.1 The Chinese belief in the value of education

Education has long been an important aspect of Chinese culture and tradition. Educational success was not only the key in changing social mobility, but it also led to a better life, including higher social status and prestige employment opportunities (Cheon, 2006; Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, & Hines, 2008). This value of education and social class influences the everyday life of Chinese families (Lien, 2006; Louie, 2004). Parents and teachers encourage adolescents to recognize the positive correlation of educational achievement and social mobility. Chinese parents are deeply influenced by Confucian philosophy, which teaches the importance of education.

Chinese societies, including Hong Kong, are preparing the youth with the knowledge and skills they need in formulating a successful future. Parents highly valued education and academic success in their families and local culture. They always reminded their adolescent children regarding the importance of education for

their future. They believe that academic success will led to a better life, higher social status, more employment opportunities, and a more satisfying marriage and relationships (Cheon, 2006; Lien, 2006; Louie, 2004). Adolescents are expected to follow the guaranteed route to success: excelling in test performance, attending prestigious schools, and earning higher degrees.

7.5.2 Traditional culture and attitudes toward fate

If we wish to end the poverty cycle, we must first understand the attitudes and beliefs of those living in poverty (Kane, 1987). The adolescents in this study had reached a point of utter frustration and fatalism. They more inclined to attribute their situation to "Mou Shi Zai Ren, Cheng Shi Zai Tian" (Man proposes but God disposes 謀事在人成事在天). Myers (2011) reports that the poor often find themselves trapped in a system of personal, social, and cultural disempowerment. Adolescents' endorsement of the world-view on fate was a result of parental transmission of values and beliefs (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Smith & Smith, 1981).

The adolescents' view of fate was also the result of parental teachings. The parents formulated their children's externalized world-view. In narrative, Shu expressed that she was strongly influenced by her mother's belief in fate or luck poverty. Kane (1987) maintains that repeated encounters with uncontrollable life events sap motivation: those living in poverty can easily fail to recognize new opportunities and possibilities for advancement. Traditional Chinese values regarding the role of luck strongly influenced the adolescents in the group and conditioned their view of the future.

7.5.3 Capitalism's influence on the adolescents' views of escaping poverty

In capitalism, poverty is the personal problem and welfare dependency is considered shameful. Therefore, it will be reasonable and rational to require personal effort rather than government to resolve their problems. The adolescents placed a

high value on employment and perceived it as a means to the escape the welfare system. Capitalist discourse stresses the moral responsibility of employment: people must work and be self-sufficient (Applebaum, 1992). Individual responsibility and personal productivity were highly valued. Therefore, the adolescents tended to reply on their personal effort rather than government to resolve their living problems.

According to Nga, money, not education, was the key to escaping poverty. Salary was used to evaluate the quality of an employment opportunity. Nga observed that employment may not allow him to escape from poverty but at least his family would no longer need to rely on CSSA. However, this focus neglects other important factors of job satisfaction, such as personal interest and potential development. The adolescents' focus on money reflects the influence of capitalism and materialism (Applebaum, 1992). The welfare dependency was perceived by the adolescents as the shameful status.

7.6 Discussion of the collaborative inquiry process

Each inquiry is complex and unique, and relies upon the participants to set the agenda, participate in the data collection, and control the use of outcomes (Winter & Munn-Giddings, 2001). I heard the adolescents repeat the adage "Zhi Shi Gai Bian Ming Yun" (knowledge changes fate, 知識改變命運), but they were more inclined to attribute their situation to "fate". Their insights and feelings into their lives were also at the centre of the inquiry process. Interestingly, the adolescents gave their different perception of their living experience in poverty to interpret the meanings of "Zhi Shi Gai Bian Ming Yun" (knowledge changes fate, 知識改變命運). As Elden and Chisholm (1993) stated, the adolescents could learn how to make sense of their own data in terms of their own language, and in relation to their own perception and values about the "fate" and the pathway to escape poverty.

It was assumed that the adolescents, through their own experience of collaboration in inquiry process, could understand their world to make sense of their

life and develop the alternative way of looking at the solution (Heron & Reason, 2001). Nga supported his friend's decision to drop out of school to work so as to improve his family's living conditions. The youngest member of the group, Yeung, still believed that education would improve his prospects because he had a good academic record and felt he should listen to his mother's advice. However, Nga quickly dominated the discussion. Almost all of the older members of the group—Ching, Ying, and Fung—agreed with Nga that with the surplus of university graduates in the market, higher education was no longer a guarantee of better prospects.

The majority of voices questioned the role of education and their personal effort to change their future, and tended to resort to fate or luck. One aspect of group collaboration is that sometimes members can be intimidated if there is strong opposition to their views. Two of the junior members Yeung and Wai had expressed different views from the majority pf voices. Even though they were in the minority, they had the courage to assert their voices firmly. Due to the maturity of the inquiry group, there were multiple voices and alternative views on the adolescents' concerns of escaping poverty in the inquiry process. However, I neglected to help the adolescents make more critical reflections on the meaning of "Zhi Shi Gai Bian Ming Yun" (knowledge changes fate, 知識改變命運) and how relevant this adage was in their impossible living conditions of being poor.

Through the collaborative inquiry, the majority of the adolescents voiced out their inability to rely on their personal effort to improve their future family living conditions. Moreover, in the collaborative inquiry, I became part of the group, struggling with the adolescents to assess how cultural values impacted on the group as a whole during the inquiry process. I was surprised that these young people had not developed greater resilience and an ability to adapt to life's challenges. Instead, they described feelings of incompetence. Against this hopeless and helpless backdrop, I invited them to figure out some possible solutions to cope with their difficulties

rather than resort to 'luck', e.g. study hard, or seek help from the existing welfare system.

Reflectively, I recognized the social discourse of the importance of education as the primary mean to improve the future living condition, so I encouraged the adolescents to have confidence in the ability to improve their future instead of relying on fate and luck. The collaborative inquiry process was helpful because it led them to articulate their feelings (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Undoubtedly, I faced the role dilemma in the inquiry process between the social worker and the researcher. Based on the social work value, I would expect the young people to develop their resilience and competence to well-adapt to their life challenges. I left it to the adolescents to look at their situation from their own perspective, rather than letting them develop new and creative ways of dealing with it (Heron & Reason, 2001). I did not impart my interpretation of the group members' situation, or discuss how their point of view had been shaped by mainstream social and cultural discourses in the Hong Kong society.

7.7 Summary of the chapter

The adolescents clearly desired to have a better life as adults. They had doubts, however, about the socially prescribed means of improving one's lot—higher education. They questioned the saying "She Shi Gai Bian Ming Yun" (Knowledge changes fate, 知識改變命運). Their own experiences did not conform to their parents' teachings. There was no guarantee of a good job at a high wage after university graduation. The study revealed that the adolescents did not feel confident that they would improve their living conditions through their personal efforts. Reluctantly, they inclined to attribute "fate" or "luck." The Chinese saying — "Mou Shi Zai Ren, Cheng Shi Zai Tian" (Man proposes but God disposes 謀事在人，成事在天) had become an important article of their faith.

Moreover, for poor adolescents, the chances of pursuing higher education are much more slim. Traditional Chinese values stress the importance of education. Through the group narratives, adolescents doubted in the discourse, which suggested higher education predicted employment opportunity, although their parents continued to require them to excel academically. In Kegan's (1982) analysis, families and parents had a strong socializing influence on their children's value judgment. Still there is a great deal of pressure to conform to parental expectations in the matter of education. Overall, however, the adolescents suffered from a sense of helplessness and frustration. Only luck would give them a chance to gain prestigious employment and the improvement of their future.

Chapter 8: Conclusion and implications for social work practice

8.1 Introduction

This thesis adopted the collaborative inquiry method to explore the experience of poverty of a group of adolescents with a view to add new theoretical understanding on the meaning of being poor of the adolescents in Hong Kong from two theoretical frameworks. My main conclusions are that the adolescents experienced Gilligan's "relational dilemma" (1982, 2003) in their daily lives and that they shouldered heavily the mental burdens (Kegan, 1982, 1994) which included the demands and expectations imposed by their social environment. Through the social construction process, we examined the subject matter from the perspective of the adolescents' particular context— the social, cultural, and historical context of Hong Kong (Gergen, 1985, 1991, 1994). In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the key findings of the study. In the second part, I conclude how did the chosen research method help the adolescents voicing out their experience of poverty and evaluate the dynamic of the inquiry process in the study. The third part of the chapter addresses the implications for social work practice, and identifies the limitations of the research and potential areas for future research and practice. Finally, I offer my personal reflections on the research journey.

8.2 Reviewing the major findings

In the literature review chapter, it was noted that children reared in poverty are more likely to have greater challenges and more negative experiences than their peers. Due to the dominate use of adult-centric and quantitative research methods, the voices of youth are rarely heard in current studies. For this study, I employed the collaborative inquiry method to gain an in-depth understanding of adolescents' experiences of poverty. Previous literature had overlooked the impact of relationships on the development of young people living in poverty. The study not only enriched our understanding of how poor adolescents make sense of their lives but also

provided a local context. I examined two related issues: how adolescents make sense of their experiences of poverty and what social and culture factors influence their interpretation.

The study used thematic analysis to provide a contextual understanding of the adolescents' experience of poverty. Four principal themes were identified: the challenges associated with the search for happiness, the efforts to reframe and reinterpret their experience of deprivation, the struggle against materialism, and the determination to escape poverty. Overall, the study offers a new framework in which to understand adolescents' experiences of the challenges of poverty (see Figure 5).
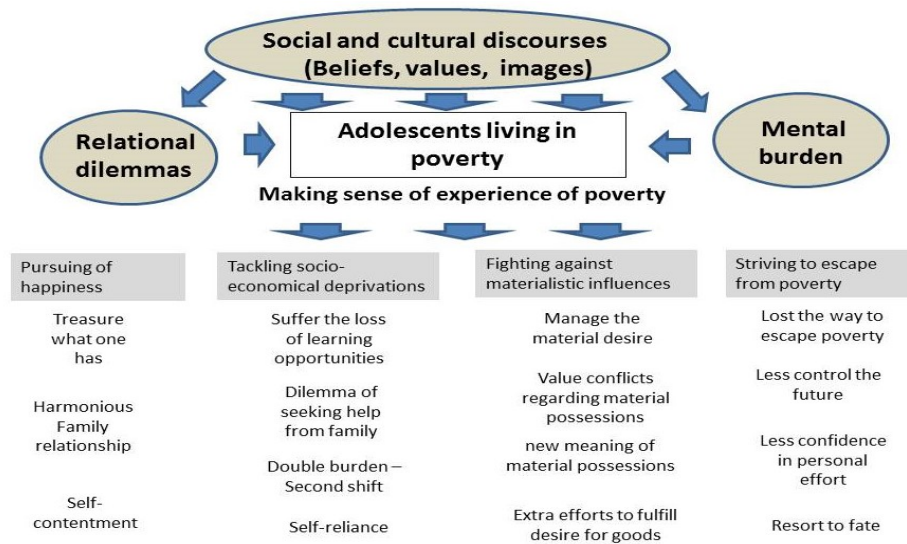
Figure 5: Conceptualization of adolescent's experience of challenges of poverty

The study gained new perspectives from Kegan's theory of the "mental burden," Gilligan's theory of the "relational dilemma," and Gergen's theory of "social constructionism." Kegan's (1994) theory of the mental burden holds that adolescents must cope with the mental burden of meeting social expectations. The members of the group, however, had not been given the resources to cope with this burden. Additionally, the adolescents experienced particular relational dilemmas associated with poverty. The study also identified various social and cultural discourses that

shaped the adolescents' interpretation of their lives. Below, I discuss how the findings of the study address the research questions.

8.2.1 Adolescents' experiences of life's challenges

The aim of this thesis is to explore adolescents' experience of poverty. Through the group narrative process, the adolescents constructed their own interpretations of their current living situations and formulated solutions to cope with their difficulties. It is common knowledge that poverty results in a lack of educational and social opportunities, fewer resources, and greater difficulties. This study contributes new theoretical insights into the developmental challenges facing the adolescents from two developmental psychological frameworks. The following are the new themes being identified:

8.2.1.1   Coping with social expectations

While the members of the group admitted that their living standard was below par, they were not willing to label their experiences as "bad" or "unhappy." They believed in treasuring what they had, living simply, and trying not to compare themselves with others. Most of their coping strategies were abstract and attitudinal, not practical or easy to put into action. As a result, the adolescents' needs were not fulfilled and their problems were unresolved. Their parents had not taught them any skills or knowledge to cope with deprivation.

The adolescents had, therefore, to "self-create" the happiness in their lives. This involved suppressing their needs. Their various strategies to adapt to their situation unfortunately did not make their situation any better. In order to maintain harmonious family relationships, they did not request any assistance from their parents. The adolescents were taught to behave correctly by not demanding family's resources to fulfill their needs and to cope with their daily problems. Through their mental reconstructing of "thinking their life simply" and "being contented easily," it is sad to see the adolescents who held their value of the living in poverty as "not necessarily

bad thing" but without any real improvement of their living. Adolescents' identified that these difficulties were related to their developmental stages.

8.2.1.2   Struggling with relational dilemmas

Family is influential in shaping adolescents' interpretation of their experience of poverty. Most adolescents are also at a stage where they are very influenced by peers. Throughout the group sessions, the adolescents shared their experiences of the conflicting values and pressures of parents and peers. They were unable to afford the status symbols that gained peer approval, and their parents considered material demands greedy. Therefore, while they were required to meet the family expectation of not coveting goods, they also needed the approval of their peers. The adolescents did not blame their families, who remained their moral compass.

In practical, there was no other choice for them. Adolescents felt the social pressure of materialism, but also experienced the burden of the moral dilemma between their peers and their sensitivity towards their families' financial conditions. As Gilligan's (1992) stated, adolescents experienced moral conflicts, which influenced their choices, actions, and preferences. They redirected their attention to responsibilities in relationships and connections with their families. Adolescents did not blame their families. Family relationships became the moral compass and the centre of adolescents' lives. The value of material possession diverged from their family and peers, producing additional stressors to adolescents. If adolescents followed their families' values, they would lose their peers' approval and acceptance. Nevertheless, if they followed their peers' values, adolescents create conflicts with their family members and may lose the family relationship. Adolescents were experiencing the dilemma and value conflict between the families and peers.

8.2.1.3   Sharing family obligations and responsibilities

The participants in this study, who were between the ages of 11 and 15, were required to work a "second shift" after their school day. They were still at an age where it was appropriate for them to be receiving care and support from their parents;

instead, they were left unattended for much of the day. In order to maintain good family relationships, the adolescents were willing to take up additional family obligations, such as taking care of younger siblings and doing housework.

Sometimes the adolescents complained that they felt they were missing their childhood—the light-heartedness and the free time. According to Elkind (1981), poor children have "a hurried childhood." More importantly, the adolescents suffered from a lack of parental support and guidance. Unlike their better-off classmates, they had to depend on themselves in determining their future. It was frustrating for them to compare themselves with their peers who had many opportunities to develop their abilities and potential.

8.2.1.4   Suppressing personal desire and needs

There have been no studies of how Hong Kong adolescents suppress their personal needs in order to cope with material temptations. Materialism permeates modern city life, through the mass media, advertising, and the proliferation of goods. Though frustrated with their inability to fulfill their material desires, the adolescents all agreed they would not resort to crime to possess desired objects. They did, however, have friends who had shoplifted or engaged in prostitution to get what they wanted. Poverty also limited their learning opportunities, which represented the potential for a better future. To cope with this, the adolescents reframed their views and sought to be content with a simple life that fulfilled only basic needs.

Income or material deprivation also caused them with less learning opportunities. The adolescents found there were unfair and experienced the sense of inequality to access the learning opportunities. However, through the family socialization, the adolescents were taught to be "content easily" and not to be "greedy." They also internally created the mind-set of treasuring non-materialist element and components in their lives, and attempted to conceptualize their experiences and produce self-reliant ways of achieving a happy life despite poverty. The adolescents "reframed" their thinking of simple-living in their lives" as better as

they expected. Adolescents were expected to understand, and be thoughtful about, the families' financial conditions.

8.2.1.5 Losing confidence in their ability to escape poverty

The study revealed that the adolescents suffered from a loss of confidence in their ability escape poverty. Although they frequently quoted the saying "Zhi Shi Gai Bian Ming Yun" (knowledge changes fate, 知識改變命運), they realized they had few learning opportunities and virtually no access to higher education. They further believed that higher education would not ensure better job opportunities or higher salaries. They anticipated that it would be difficult to find a good job, given the current labour market and the stiff competition.

This loss of hope and confidence undermined the adolescents' sense of well-being. The adolescents lost their courage to demand further from their family and eventually resorted to fate in explaining their lack of equal opportunities and efforts (Kluegel, Mason, & Wegener 1995). Feeling powerless, they relied on luck rather than personal effort to improve their lot.

8.2.2 Social and cultural factors influencing the adolescents' view of poverty

The second research question is to examine the extent to which social and cultural factors influenced the adolescents' view of poverty. The study contributes to bring the new dimension into the local poverty studies. Through the group construction process, I was able to identify the key socio-cultural forces that have either encouraged or restricted their coping strategies. As far as the social constructionists' concern, the person's account of an experience is an artefact of the process of social interaction. Individuals acquire an understanding of their community's "collective intelligence" (Kegan, 1994, p. 134). The findings of study shows that the adolescents' experience of poverty and the "collective intelligence" are deeply connected to their social and cultural context and are strongly shaped by

Chinese traditional culture, Confucianism, capitalism, and materialism. These social and cultural beliefs shaped the adolescents' interpretation of life challenges and construction of solution. Based on this new understanding, I can offer new directions for future intervention.

8.2.2.1 Ambivalence towards the traditional culture

The influence of the Chinese traditional culture could be seen in the adolescents' worldview and their conception of fate. Chinese culture views adversity as a challenge. Adages such as "Chi De Ku Zhong Ku, Fang Wei Ren Shang Ren" (hardship increases stature, 吃得苦中苦，方為人上人) and "Ren Ding Sheng Tian" (man is the master of his own fate, 人定勝天) convey this view. There are, however, also sayings that oppose this view, such as "Mou Shi Zai Ren, Cheng Shi Zai Tian" (man proposes but God disposes, 成事在天謀事在人) and "Yi Ming, Er Yun, San Feng Shui, Si Du Shu" (fate, luck, feng-shui, and then studying, 一命二運三風水，四讀書).

The adolescents' reliance on fate was clearly a reflection of their parents' values and beliefs. Shek (2003) noted that Chinese cultural beliefs about adversity are commonly adopted by Chinese parents and their adolescent children. Bryant Myers (2011) describes the poor as trapped inside a system of disempowerment—personal, social, and cultural. Kane (1987) argues that repeated encounters with uncontrollable life events create motivational deficits so that poor people often fail to recognize new opportunities and possibilities for advancement. Through the group construction process, the study revealed that cultural beliefs about adversity still had an impact on adolescents' interpretation of poverty.

8.2.2.2 Collectivism and family harmony

The adolescents in the study valued family harmony highly: it was more important than their personal interests, which they sacrificed to maintain good family relationships. This commitment to the collective over the individual is typical of

Chinese society (Persson 2010). The adolescents were socialized to pursue collective rather than individual goals and to conform to their parents' expectations (Ho, 1994; Lam, 1997; Meredith et al., 1989).

Confucianism, the foundation of the Chinese value system, teaches that stability and harmony are the basis of a society. Confucian principles support politeness and obedience. The choice of the adolescents demonstrated the Chinese value of collectivism in which they had to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals. They were expected to act in ways that promote family solidarity and harmony.

8.2.2.3 Traditional culture and the importance of education

In the Confucian tradition, Chinese parents value education highly as a means of socialization and success. In Chinese society including Hong Kong, education was supposed not only to be an extremely important means of personal advancement but also to prepare young people with the knowledge and skills which they needed to safeguard their future successful. Both parents and teachers impress upon students the close relationship between educational attainment and social mobility. The adolescents were taught there is nothing more important than studying (萬般皆下品，唯有讀書高). Despite having fewer educational resources, they were required to follow this path, even though they strongly doubted its efficacy.

8.2.2.4 Cultural-social forces influencing the adolescents' attitudes towards consumerism

The influence of materialism is evident throughout Hong Kong. The adolescents absorbed materialistic values from family members, peers, and the media (Kasser et al., 2004). Peer pressure, especially, guided the adolescents' views of the necessary status symbols. Fear of being viewed as a "have not" exacerbated their difficulties (Chow 2002). Material possessions mattered to the adolescents not only because of their monetary value but also because of "face-work." The value of "Mianzi" (social face) encouraged the adolescents to yearn for certain status symbols (Wong &

Ahuvia, 1998). Hu (1944) differentiates "lien" (moral face), which represents one's moral character, from "Mianzi", which represents status and success. The latter is particularly important during adolescence (Ward & Wackman 1971: 422).

8.3 Reflection on the use of collaborative inquiry method

This is the first study adopting collaborative inquiry as a methodology in the study of childhood poverty in Hong Kong. The paradigm of collaborative inquiry is participatory: it allows the disadvantaged to make their concerns heard (Anderson & Gehart, 2007; Gehart, Tarragona & Bava, 2007). As shown in Figure 3 of the methodology chapter, the first step of the collaborative inquiry process is "forming a collaborative inquiry group" and the final step is "making meaning by constructing knowledge." In practice, collaborative inquiry is flexible and does not follow predetermined stages. The inquiry process was ongoing— a flow of continuous and overlapping cycles of action and reflection. In this section, I will reflect on how the collaborative inquiry process enabled the adolescents to co-construct knowledge through the group inquiry process. I will also summarize the lessons I had learned from the inquiry process as a researcher.

8.3.1 Participating, acting, and reflecting in the inquiry process

At the heart of collaborative inquiry is the assumption that learning resides in the experience of the inquirers. The impact of the inquiry process was to facilitate the adolescents to have opportunity of expression and reflection. With the encouraging and supportive group atmosphere, each of adolescents in the group, who contributed to the present inquiry, was willing to listen to, share with, learn from, and negotiate with the others. The group discussions provided a wide array of accounts of the experience of living in poverty. The process fulfilled Greenwood and Levin's (2005) goal for collaborative inquiry: it allowed the adolescents to form new understandings

about their experience in poverty. These include the four themes: the pursuit of happiness, tackling socio-economic deprivations, fighting against materialism, and striving to escape poverty.

8.3.1.1 Encouraging the adolescents to express themselves

Guided by the research questions, the adolescents and I had passed through cycles of action and reflection which significantly determined what could be learned from their experiences. A training and orientation workshop was conducted before the inquiry process, where I briefed the adolescents about the collaborative inquiry method and their role as co-researchers.

They were invited to select an area of inquiry based on their daily living experiences and discuss their ways to define what their struggles and challenges were and their coping strategies. To overcome any distortions that would arise from my selection biases due to my narrow and self-referential orientation, I included all the inquiry areas they proposed. At the outset, the adolescents' interest in collaborative inquiry was relatively shallow. The inquiry process seemed vague to the group but soon the group achieved certain structures to facilitate the exploration.

The inquiry group adopted ground rules for working together and agreed upon the subjects they wanted to explore For example, they were asked to share their personal circumstances with others and to make active their contribution to the inquiry process. As compared to other social work group process, the inquiry group stressed their active participation so that their voices could be heard. The collaborative inquiry process became an opportunity for capacity-building.

8.3.1.2 Creating the conditions for the adolescents' participation in the inquiry process

As Heron and Reason (2001) note, this methodology requires that the relationship between the researcher and participants be one of "collaborators." In order to achieve this, there were two prerequisites. The first was a collaborative

climate among the members in the groups, and the second was potential questions for reflective discussion. On the one hand, it was important that the adolescents could experience the collaborative climate with supportive and encouraging in the group after attending the training and orientation workshop. On the other hand, I did not pose any pre-set questions and I started the inquiry process by asking the adolescents to share their daily experiences instead of discussing research driven questions— buying sneakers, sharing family responsibilities, feeling frustrated about the future, etc. A collaborative climate was built through this kind of non-structured approach to inquiry. As Reason and Bradbury (2001) maintain, collaborative inquiry tries to find practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to the participants. The reflective questions centered on identifying issues they wanted to find new solutions.

Collaborative inquiry is a process in which the participants take on the dual role of co-inquirer and object of inquiry (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kalu, 2007). It was critical to create a collaborative climate among the members of the group and determine the potential questions for our further discussions. The adolescents had no experience of talking about, or reflecting on, their experiences in a group setting. I had to encourage them to feel at ease to share about whatever came to mind. This gave me an opportunity to identify their areas of concern and allowed me to be more sensitive to each person's entry point. The adolescents determined the themes and discussion direction, and agreed upon the co-construction of the collaborative inquiry process. We engaged in cycles of action, and reflection. Just by observing and listening to the group, the adolescents developed a better understanding of their experiences; later, they felt comfortable enough to behave in less structured and predictable ways. It was particularly important in these initial stages to accept and appreciate the differences among the adolescents because these allowed them to explore their meaning of researching into their lived experiences.

8.3.1.3 Proceeding with the inquiry

The collaborative inquiry process is, as Heron and Reason (2001) attest, the "touchstone" of the inquiry method. The purpose of our collaborative inquiry was to

generate a new understanding of the adolescents' experience of poverty. To help the adolescents become involved in the project, I asked them to prepare notes on their experiences and reflections. The adolescents had gradually become more confident of their ability to come up with issues of their concern. Keeping records was an important part of the process which provided the basis for analysis and interpretation.

To increase the group's sense of ownership in the project, I invited each of the adolescents to comment on the inquiry process. One member, Nga, was the first to take up the leading role for the group discussion. All of the adolescents influenced by this active participation and made contributions from their personal experience. Collaboration is likely to sharpen people's capacity to conduct their own research and liberate minds for new critical reflections (Tracy, 2008). The contributions had not progressed in a linear fashion. There were several simultaneous streams of thought, ebbing and flowing, rising to the surface, or sinking to the depths.

The collaborative nature of the inquiry gave the adolescents the opportunity to contribute to decisions that affected them and to gain knowledge about their circumstances (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). In other words, the adolescents could understand more fully their living conditions and better make sense of their lives. Through the collaborative inquiry process, they were able to offer new meanings associated with their daily experiences. For example, the adolescents reinvented a new definition on the concept of "basic needs," which they extended to include not only the basic necessities, such as food, shelter, clothing, etc. but learning opportunities. Learning opportunities referred not to schooling but resources to improve their academic achievement, such as afterschool tutorial classes

With the support from the worker, the group summarized their views in inquiry notes (see Appendix I). I was worried that there were too many themes to handle. Hence, I asked the group to determine how they wanted the inquiry process to proceed. In order to streamline the inquiry and make it more manageable, the group proposed three principles to decide on the research questions: Was the meaning of

the question clear? Was it relevant to their situation? Did they have experiences that related to the question? From this discussion, various themes emerged, including kinds of poverty, living with deprivation, and lack of family support and guidance (see Figure 2).

The study gave the adolescents and me access to our shared feelings and allowed us to gain a better understanding. The inquiry process also facilitated the adolescents moving toward to the beginning level of inter-subjectivity on how to deal with the shared and reciprocal experiences of the adolescents whereby the experience of each has an impact on the experience of the others (Trevarthen, 2001). One major issue arising from the process of arriving at inter-subjectivity was the conflict of seeing the world differently. For example, sometimes the views of the senior and junior members differed: for instance, Ching and Wai found their living conditions unacceptable and challenging, but Yeung, the youngest member, felt good about his current living condition. The group had struggled to accept the beauty of having multiple viewpoints. They also understood they did not have to agree.

The group also proceeded with a number of episodes of power struggles. For example, most of the group members attached important meanings to material goods because they subscribed to the values of a consumer culture. Yeung was an exception who was firm that people should not pursue after luxury goods. The senior members of the group argued that luxury goods should be considered necessities. Under the group pressure, Yeung was silenced. This illustrates that this group might not have reached a level by which they could make use of inquiry approach to resolve their differences.

8.3.1.4 Interpreting the adolescents' experiences

The collaborative inquiry process enabled them to be self-reflexive (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kalu, 2007). New ideas were inspired by the themes we generated earlier. The inquiry process allowed the adolescents to re-evaluate and interpret their experiences of poverty so that they could see new possibilities for the future. As

Ching said, it was necessary that they could find coping strategies because "poverty can drive people to do evil deeds"（因貧窮而去做壞事）.

There was no formal conclusion of collaborative inquiry cycle: it continued until the group reached the "saturation" of their research interests (Greenwood & Levin, 2005). I wanted to encourage the members to reflect deeply and examine their underlying assumptions. After the inquiry was over, I went over the 900 pages of transcripts, my field notes, and my journal entries to refresh the essences of the inquiry sessions with the adolescents. While I was developing categories and themes, I shared my observations and analyses with the adolescents. This really contributed to the building trustworthiness of the findings and gave the group members more practical understanding to search for better coping to address their daily challenges.

Through their continuous and persistent participation, the members of the group widened their understanding poverty. As Bray et al. (2000) stated, the collaborative inquiry process became the practice of fostering learning to the adolescents. They could not change their living conditions, but, collectively, they came up with methods to deal with them. The adolescents were able to be honest with themselves and admit that living in poverty was often very difficult. They also had the opportunity to re-evaluate their desires and decide whether they needed to be fulfilled.

8.3.2 My own reflections in the collaborative inquiry process

Collaborative inquiry is a relatively new research methodology in Hong Kong. The success of collaborative inquiry depends on the quality and degree of the inquirer's self-reflexivity (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kalu, 2007). In this section, I will describe my reflections on the inquiry process, which fell into four categories: role conflicts between the group members and me, the conflicts inherent in being both a practitioner and a researcher, the knowledge gap between the group members and me, and the empowering impact of the inquiry process.

8.3.2.1 Role conflicts

The inquiry process was difficult to contain within boundaries; what we thought about with respect to the inquiry exercise became as important as our activities within the group. I had different roles in the collaborative group with the adolescents. As a researcher, a social worker, and a group member, I experienced some role conflicts. There was a dilemma because the group members would rely on me as the "leader" but I should be aware of the "over" influence the adolescents as service recipients rather than as participants in inquiry process. I should have been prepared for the possibility that the learning generated during the process would take the inquiry in directions other than those envisioned at the outset. To avoid controlling the group, I sometimes overcompensated and held back from participating fully so that I would not encourage group dependency. The ideal goal might be to have full participation of all members, including me. However, sometimes, I might limit to participation into the inquiry process in order to keep my "neutral" role as a "researcher" in the group, e.g. the discussion of "self-reliance". In other situation, I might take an over active role to detour the inquiry direction and limit the adolescents' narration about their feeling. As time went on, the adolescents increasingly took ownership of the process. It was easier to balance our participation, and I no longer worried about taking control of the process.

8.3.2.2 Inherent value conflict

I alerted the main function of me in the inquiry process to facilitate the adolescents to make sense out of their experiences of poverty. However, I unintentionally did not perform to allow the multiple voices in some scenarios of the inquiry process. For instance, the majority voices of the group held a positive mind-set towards their experience of poverty. They dominated the group view and suppressed the minority voices of two members (Wai and Ying) who felt frustration in living in poverty desperately. In another scenario, I did not question whether the adolescents' their faith in self-reliance was appropriate while hearing their stories about their coping strategy with the challenges in poverty. In making critical reflection on my assumptions which I had been upholding during the inquiry process,

I discovered that I had subscribed to the social work value of "helping the clients help themselves." I would have guided the group to converge into the collective and socially accepted resolution. The problem was that I did not help the adolescents make their critical reflection to examine whether they really felt happiness or how relevance of the concept of "self-reliance" in their impossible living conditions of being poor. For keeping my "neutral" role, I did not contribute my interpretation of the group members' situation or discuss how their point of view had been shaped by ideological ideas circulated in the Hong Kong society.

8.3.2.3 Knowledge gap

The adolescents and I embarked on a learning cycle of action and reflection. As Kolb (1984) stressing on learning from experiences, the adolescents and I made use of the inquiry process as a learning cycle of action and reflection which involving reflection on their past personal experiences, and leading to new experience in the inquiry group. One of the many surprises I experienced was that my original views about poverty and children's responses to it were not borne out by the group discussions. For example, the group challenged my existing knowledge of what constituted a basic need. There was a significant knowledge gap between the adolescents and me. My unquestioned assumptions were challenged by their accounts of their experiences and feelings. I realized that I should change my thinking to address the poverty problem in Hong Kong and improve social work support.

8.3.2.4 Empowerment

At the conclusion of the inquiry group sessions, I noticed a positive change in the knowledge and competence of the adolescents. They had learned to adopt a positive attitude and active strategy to deal with their problems; many had revised their understanding in fundamental ways. The collaborative inquiry process relies on voluntary participation, and learners taking responsibility for their own learning. Greenwood and Levin's (1998) theory of transferability states that findings are not generalized through abstraction but are transferred from a sending context to a

receiving context. During the course of the inquiry, the adolescents were involved in the process of meaning making. They became empowered and had greater confidence in their own ability to gather and use information that would help them to meet the challenges of poverty.

8.4 Implications for social work practice

The focus of a collaborative inquiry is on understanding and constructing meaning around experience – a focus that may involve enhancement of some aspect of one's practice, creating a new context for one's practice, or problem solving (Bray et al., 2000). The study revealed that the adolescents not only recognized the many deprivations associated with living in poverty but also suffered from relational and moral conflicts and burdens. As social work professionals, we must channel our efforts toward research that will improve practice.

With the insight from social construction theory, the adolescents would construct their meanings of the world and the self, understanding their experience and interpretations. Based on social constructionist principles, there are five core qualities that should be included in the social work practice, such as: (1) understanding of the assumptions of any form of knowledge; (2) development of critical thinking; (3) recognition of the importance of reflexivity in human beings; (4) enhancement of the awareness of historical and cultural relativity; and (5) recognition of the strengths of adolescents (Lit & Shek, 2002). In following sections, I recommend social work interventions at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels.

8.4.1 At the micro level – strengthening critical and reflective practices

At the micro level, there should be services and support available to poor adolescents. An adolescent must be resilient and equipped to cope with life's challenges. The inquiry encouraged the adolescents to voice the feeling of helplessness and strain that they usually suppressed in order to meet the expectations

of their family and society. The influences of historical and cultural forces on adolescents' behavior are obvious and significant. Therefore, this study suggests that adolescents living in poverty should be encouraged to question social expectations. A social constructionist approach to helping adolescents living in poverty would facilitate adolescents to recognize the degree to which they construct their own reality and to question their automatic responses, which are culturally conditioned. In helping the poor adolescents to overcome the burden associated with poverty by adopting cognitive restructuring at the individual level, the social worker should help the adolescent challenge and overcome the dominant social and cultural discourse, such as the common belief of "self-reliance."

Social constructionism holds that the cultural and social context shapes the construction of "self," which cannot exist objectively and independently. We also would explore in detail the ways that the adolescents use to construct one's reality and how they interpret such constructs. The emphasis would not be to solve or eliminate problems, but to open up a space for narration (McNamee & Gergen, 1992). When adolescents feel helpless and hopeless, personal development programs and counselling services should be available. The oppressive elements against adolescents in the traditional Chinese culture as previous discussed should also be exposed and challenged. Such an approach would help the adolescents become active agents, constructing and interpreting their reality, and retaining personal control over their situation.

As Kegan (1994) observes, "knowing" is not simply "cognition." It is the organizing principle that we bring to our thinking and feeling. Adolescents should be able to acquire the knowledge that will help them reframe their perceptions and outlook. If they can apply what Schon calls "theory in use" or "espoused theory" (1987), they can see their lives as personal constructs (Beck & Emery, 1985). When they encounter difficulties, they will be able to evaluate their reasoning and the influence of the socio-cultural discourse. It is important to develop an understanding of how automatic thoughts are generated; then adolescents can recognize the impact

they have on their own choices and behaviour, Adaptive capacity is another strategy that helps adolescents overcoming their burdens (Maru, Fletcher, & Chewings, 2012).

8.4.2 At the mezzo level – nurturing realistic expectation on children and creating family supports

At the mezzo level, it is necessary to create a healthy and supportive social environment to support adolescents' development. Family is an irreplaceable social system that not only provides basic necessities. The parents also nurture their children values and beliefs about their living. As Kegan's stated (1994), the family not only serves as a learning environment for adolescents, it is also a place to foster their psychological 'evolution'. To lighten their children's mental burdens, parents should be aware the dominant cultural beliefs that influence their child-rearing practices which could be the cause of adolescents' struggle with the life challenges of poverty. Gergen (1994) stated that all values, ideologies and social institutions are human-made according to the social and cultural discourses. Therefore, social workers should be culturally sensitive in practice and reflect on the cultural effects on of the parents' upbringing. Because we cannot know the parents' objective reality, all knowing requires an act of interpretation. Our social work interventions should focus on supporting and encouraging the parents to review critically if their expectations of their children are beyond their children's capacity. Importantly, through the process of social discourse of how meanings are constructed, the social workers should help the parents overcome their irrational beliefs about child rearing and child development.

Undoubtedly, parents must stay involved in their adolescent children's lives, and provide acceptance and support (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Openshaw, Thomas, & Rollins, 1984). The positive and close connection with parents has a critical impact on the adolescents' well-being. The study showed that adolescents felt incapable of changing their future through effort or education. According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1990), parents who are aware of the demands of the dominant culture can equip their children with alternative languages, skills,

and attitudes that will encourage educational success, power, and wealth. The focus of social work intervention should be to help parents provide effective and sufficient support, which will foster confidence in their adolescent children.

In order to maintain close relationships with their parents, the adolescents in the study had to sacrifice their needs. They pointed out that they did not receive help from their families and neighbourhood, and were seldom able to participate in social activities. It is important that low-income families build a social network. The larger community can also provide support and services, such as childcare, to families in need. Adolescents should be given opportunities to develop positive and healthy relationships with their peers. Peers are an important source of self-esteem for adolescents as they provide positive feedback and reinforcement (Klint & Weiss, 1986). Having good friends lessens the sense of deprivation that poor adolescents experience and increases their feelings of security and competence (Weiss & Ebbeck, 1996).

A mentoring program is another way to help disadvantaged youth escape the long shadow of childhood poverty (CoP, 2007). It is important to provide poor adolescents with exposure to adults other than their parents. Through mentoring programs, adolescents can widen their social horizon. Mentoring puts children in contact with positive role models who have strong social and interpersonal skills (Selman, 1980). Mentors enlighten adolescents by introducing them to community resources, improving their learning and problem-solving skills, and boosting their self-confidence. To build up the adolescents' social assets, there must be a healthy and supportive social environment.

8.4.3 At the macro level – advocating policy change and institutional reform

At the macro level, it is important to advocate social policies that promote the healthy development of poor adolescents and provide sufficient services to their

families. The current social and economic policies do not favour low-income families. To make a living, parents with low-paying jobs must work for long hours, leaving their school-aged children unattended. As this study has shown, adolescents often must work a second shift as housekeepers and caregivers to younger siblings. Since the adolescents rarely complain, this issue has not received much attention. As social workers, we should make this problem visible and advocate policies that address it.

The adolescents in this study saw their poverty as a family problem, not an institutional one. However, social problems are the result of unfair and unbalanced social systems. Poor families are not solely responsible for their poverty: structural and institutional inequalities are also to blame. We need to examine critically the social system and policies that have not addressed these inequalities. The government has a moral responsibility to solve the problem of poverty, through providing more jobs and improving educational opportunities for the poor.

Welfare assistance provides necessities such as food and shelter, but adolescents also need the resources to develop their capabilities. Increasing families' financial resources is critical. Although a statutory minimum wage has been implemented, it has not solved the problems of poor families. What is needed is the introduction of family-friendly policies in the workplace. These would include reasonable working hours and salary levels.

None of these tasks can be accomplished without drastic systemic changes. Social activists can point out ineffective measures and propose desirable changes. To address the problem, however, there must be policy reformation, such as readjusting the poverty line, raising the minimum wage, expanding the safety net, ensuring access to medical care, and coordinating social insurance programs. Government representatives should not be excluded from the discussions. Eventually, policies will become more just and fair, and more respectful of individual rights.

8.5 Limitations of this study and suggestions for future research

8.5.1 Limitations arising from the research design and data analysis

When viewed from the perspective of the quantitative paradigm, this study suffers from some limitations. The ten adolescents in the inquiry group provided in-depth descriptions of their own experience of poverty. Still the small number of participants makes it difficult to prove a causal relationship between economic disadvantage and adolescent development. Therefore, the primary limitation of this study arises from its qualitative methodology. Given the primacy of the quantitative approach Hong Kong practice, this qualitative study appears to be insufficiently representative and generalizable.

The second limitation concerns subjectivity. My active involvement in the inquiry and data-collection processes, together with my relationship with the participants, would make it easy for me to lose my objectivity. Data analysis relies heavily on the interpretation of the researcher. There is a high risk that the subjective bias and personal preoccupations of the researcher can lead to misinterpretations of the findings. To minimize this possibility, I invited my peers and colleagues to review my behaviour in the inquiry process and the data analysis and construction. I too reviewed the inquiry processes looking for any possible signs of inherent subjectivity.

The third limitation is related to the data interpretation. The adolescents' descriptions of their experiences could have been influenced by outside factors. The members of the group may have possessed specific characteristics that led them to volunteer for this study. The study depended on the participants' memories and their willingness to report their experiences in poverty to the inquiry group. In short, the contributions of the participants were, by necessity, multi-layered, ambiguous, and

subjective. This unavoidable subjectivity raises the question of what criteria should be used for the assessment of narrative research (Carter, 1993; Josselson, 1996). Ambiguities are generated simply by language. For example, "happiness," "not bad," or "not unhappy" can be used differently by different people. In order to reduce ambiguities, I often checked with the adolescents to make sure I was accurately interpreting their statements.

The fourth limitation of this study is that the analysis of the data was heavily dependent on my constructions and those of the adolescents. The narrative approach provides an opportunity to address the ambiguities, uncertainties, complexities, and dynamism of a situation, but it also allows subjective opinions to bias the conclusions. When I used the participants' comments to formulate a larger narrative, I imposed meaning on their experiences. Riessman (1993) notes that investigators should not treat personal narratives and their interpretations as equivalents to the original lived experience. To minimize my own impositions, I consulted with the adolescents about my interpretation of the collected data.

Some limitations of this study arose from time constraints. The study could not be comprehensive: it was only able to capture the concerns that were significant during the inquiry process. A longer time frame would have provided a more complete picture of the adolescents' lives. In addition, time constraints did not allow the inquiry group to complete the reflection and action cycle. The adolescents described 'suppressing their materialistic desires' (唔好諗) at the beginning of the inquiry process. By the middle of inquiry process, when they had time to reflect, they realized that they had become 'accustomed to' (習慣左) this way of thinking. If the group members had been given more time, they could have worked on formulating solutions to cope with their mental burdens.

8.5.2 Future research suggestions

Based on the collected findings of the study, there are two suggestions of future research in local context. The inquiry group method provided the participants with an opportunity to co-create group knowledge. Originally, the study was intended to go through several action and reflection cycles; however, we were only able to complete one cycle. Another inquiry cycle would have helped the adolescents develop the practical knowledge to address their daily problems. Therefore, it would be extremely valuable to conduct a second cycle of inquiry with the same participants.

In the new cycle of inquiry, the study would review the participants' original contributions, re-evaluate their interpretation of their experiences, encourage the adolescents to develop plans to change their situation, and examine the inquiry process and result. This study aims not only to enrich the local understanding of child poverty, but also to develop practical knowledge that will aid the needy.

Through the collaborative inquiry process, the study discovered new aspects of adolescents' experience of poverty that confirmed Gilligan's theory of relational dilemmas and Kegan's theory of mental burden. In addition, the study also identifies the social and cultural discourse that shaped the adolescents' interpretation of poverty. Therefore, there is a new focus to the local poverty study which is to expand the examination of the impact of social-cultural factors shaping their parents in parenting practices, and to evaluate how the social-cultural factors shape the poor adolescents' coping strategies to their life challenges.

8.6 Conclusion: personal reflection

The study is the first local study that adopts collaborative inquiry to examine the poor adolescents' subjective perceptions and experiences in their particular context. The qualitative approach is rarely used in Hong Kong poverty research. It is not necessary to decide whether the quantitative or the qualitative approach is better: each contributes to our knowledge of the situation.

In the past, I acquired theoretical, rather than practical, knowledge of how to assist poor adolescents. I have gained very valuable knowledge through this collaboration: I have been given an opportunity to share in not only the adolescents' experiences but also in their interpretations and beliefs. This experience prompted me to review critically my early thinking. The inquiry created bonds among those who participated in the process. I tried to immerse myself in the adolescents' context so that I could develop a greater understanding of their experiences and realities. My approach was not neutral and independent, but collaborative. I have learnt to trust my inner voice and affective, intuitive knowledge.

In conclusion, social constructionists caution me that the adolescents' meaning-making process is culturally and historically specific. Thus, I, as social worker, should adopt a not-knowing position, require constant reflection over my assumptions, as well as my own positions and biases in the dialogical narration with the adolescents. This study has made me more acutely aware of my aims as a social worker: my goal is to help adolescents resolve their problems, not leave them to deal with their struggles alone. The social work profession should no longer enjoy a dominant and superior role, assuming that they know everything including the truth (McNamee & Gergen, 1992). Therefore, this last chapter of the study is not the last chapter of my learning journey. Although it is impossible to eradicate poverty in our society, we can at least allow poor people to outline their needs and describe their real living situations. Studies like this one provide a way for individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds to express themselves.

Appendix

Appendix I: Adolescents' Sharing Notes (In Chinese)

組員主題	組員的分享
1. 睇到貧窮並不一定是唔開心,即使生活在貧窮當中亦有不同開心的事、物及情	生活在貧窮有甚麼可能的不開心 ● 不能滿足物質上之需要 ● 不覺貧窮令人不開心。 ● 在金錢方面因與人比較而不開心 ● 朋友有的東西我沒有,相互比較下感到自卑(間接);其次和朋友逛街時不能亂買東西,例如友情信物,引致不合群(直接)。 ● 被人取笑或輕視;穿不暖及吃不飽;因金錢分配而引起家庭糾紛;因貧而不能參加一些課外活動,潛能所限,力不從心。
	這些不開心的東西是甚麼原因?貧窮關係 – 直接與間接 ● 是因為經濟上有限制 ● 太多有直接關係。 ● 因是沒有足夠的金錢,故與貧窮直接掛勾。 ● 被打,被罵 ● 因為窮而沒有能力得到 ● 可能因為貧,不能如有錢人想要甚麼便有甚麼,故一旦擁有,便會十分珍惜該東西。 ● 患難見真情,在沒有金錢利益下的親情才是真的,故更珍惜家人;而由於儲蓄很久才買到該物品,故會好好保管及使用,珍惜物品;而可以讀書和免費參加課外活動,故會珍惜該機會。 ● 使人決心找出方法以改善當下狀況,靠努力達致物質生活
	生活在貧窮有甚麼可能的開心(在那些方面) ● 不覺貧窮令人不開心。 ● 與家人有良好的關係 ● 可申請綜緩,獲取不同福利,因而無憂無慮 ● 即使是小事,如三餐溫飽也感到滿足,因為只要想到非洲可憐的孩子便明白要感恩 ● 因生活簡樸而更重視非物質東西,如情感,在社交上會更好,與家人相處融洽,因了解家庭苦況,更懂得體諒與關懷;貧窮是動力,貧窮的孩子在學習上比一般人更多功夫,因明白知識改變命運,故常取得優異成績,因而感到快樂。 ● 容易滿足 ● 有朋友和家人之關心
	生活在貧窮有甚麼可能的開心(在那些方面) ● 一家人聚在一起也開心
	為甚麼生活在貧窮會導致不開心及有甚麼原因/元素可以令自己開心 ● 在金錢方面因與人比較而不開心,但可嘗試不在意別人的眼光。 ● 買不到自己心愛的物品
	有甚麼方法及途徑令自己開心 ● 嘗試不在意別人的眼光。 ● 貧窮的生活都有不開心,但只要你樂觀地面對自己的生活,可能會尋找到生活的樂趣。 ● 做令自己開心的事,如考試考得好 ● 跟家人玩
2. 生活在貧窮中是受到不少限制,故此在有限的機會下如何去努力去爭取,以期望可以獲得公平的機會	在甚麼方面及有甚麼限制 ● 在經濟上有限制 ● 認為貧窮使很多人放棄機會。 ● 由於缺乏金錢而無法發展自身的專長。 ● 有錢人的起步點,長大後家人可能已準備了他們的後路,但貧窮人士卻要靠自己一手一腳去準備自己的後路。 ● 由於家財上不及其他小朋友富裕,故其他小朋友能做的事自己不能做。 ● 金錢和財力上之限制;因貧而沒能力參與自費活動,使潛能不能被發掘。
	有甚麼爭取的途徑爭取? ● 申請資助。 ● 參與有關機構的小組 ● 爭取參與學校或其他機構多元化之活動 ● 一些幫助窮人之機構 ● 努力讀書,將來找一份好的工作
	甚麼才算獲得公平的機會? ● 無論貧富,不看所有的財產,而著重其本身。 ● 只能勉強溫飽,無法消費必需品以外的東西。 ● 能做其他小孩都能做的事,例如學習課外活動的機會,因為現今社會追求擁有多項技能,故此不論學校或是工作面試都會問及,有助加分;而學習不同技能後,將來將可從事相關職業,增加了

		脫貧機會。 ● 與所有人都有相同之機會參與課外活動 ● 每個人待遇都一樣 ● 因有些物資不能得到, 應人有我有才公平
3. 生活在貧窮下因經濟不足下未能滿足個人的需要（可能是衣、食、住、行），在此情況造成家人間在「用錢」上（態度、用量及項目）有不同的意見所產生的家人之間的問題	何謂不足？程度？ ● 不足是指不能滿足日常生活的需要，例如衣食住行，會影響家庭關係。 ● 不認為這與貧窮有直接關係。 ● 金錢及親情。 ● 無法應付生活所需，如經濟開支	
	在那一方面會出現不足的問題？ ● 在經濟方面會有不足的問題。 ● 因零用錢而與家人關係破裂。 ● 行街 ● 衣食住行，子女學習上之費用 ● 學業	
	所謂家庭關係問題是指甚麼？ ● 是指家人間在「用錢」上有不同的意見。 ● 為了節約開支而與家人發生爭執，如子女為買潮流玩物，但父母應經濟原因未能給予，因而發氏爭執。 ● 家庭關係指家人之間之和睦相處。因金錢有限，如何分配使用或存放容易產生分歧，引起爭執，破壞和諧。 ● 令對方失去了對自己之信任	
	家人是指 – 父母、親子、兄弟姊妹間、或其他 ● 母親 ● 家人指父母、監護人、親兄弟姊妹和養子女	
	這些問題造成了甚麼影響？ ● 令家人之間關係變差。 ● 即使說話亦只有簡單的回應，本人（浩林）的事例，（因金錢而導致與母親關係疏離每天只有以下3句對話： ● 母：去吃飯吧！ 我：嗯 ● 母：去洗澡吧！ 我：哦 　■　母：去睡覺吧！ 我：好 ● 青少年在金錢上的需要相對比較多，因為他們心理上想追求潮流，買較多東西打扮自己，所以在金錢方面會產生和家長爭吵的機會。 ● 因爭執而鬥氣，從而影響成績和健康。 ● 造成生活困難和家庭糾紛，子女因不願或厭煩父母爭吵而離家出走或在街上流連，可能因而變成「夜青」 ● 家庭暴力及紛爭 ● 離間了家人之間的感情	
4. 即使生活在貧窮，但仍能夠不因為滿足不了需要而造壞事	生活在貧窮有甚麼問題 ● 不能滿足物質上的需要。 ● 故要學會知足。 ● 金錢不足 ● 很多偷東西的人都可能是因為家中很貧，但自己又想要那東西，所以才去偷東西。 ● 因沒有錢而不能和朋友逛街，致不合群，導致自卑和傷害自尊心。 ● 不能享受物質生活，參與付費活動，被人看輕。	
	這些問題會導致有甚麼問題 ● 引致不開心而去做一些犯法的事。 ● 因不滿而犯罪。 ● 因自尊感低，造成內向，致情緒低落，這會影響家庭、社交、同儕關係及學習。 ● 使貧者快樂指數下降，甚而鑽牛角尖 ● 使家庭不和睦而做壞事	
	這些問題會引致生活在貧窮的人做甚麼壞事 ● 去偷東西。 ● 為了得到金錢而去偷、搶、騙，甚至販毒、水貨或私煙，向富裕同學收取保護費；而為了報復而作出欺凌或打人。 ● 令有些人可能因生活困苦而去偷竊和出賣自己	
	有甚麼因素可以抗拒	

	● 買一些便宜的東西代替。 ● 向政府反映我們的不足。 ● 自身道德水平、良友之勸告或他人之援手（如借出金錢）及家庭教育。 ● 找可信任的人幫助
	有甚麼方法可以抗爭 ● 自己努力去儲蓄。 ● 兼職、自我控制慾望，參與免費活動 ● 找可信任的人幫助
5.　面對生活在貧窮下，怎樣可以抗衡物質引誘	貧窮生活與物質生活的關係 ● 不能享受物質生活。 ● 要學會知足。 ● 因貧窮而無法獲取物質。
	貧窮在生活所需要那些物質 ● 需要金錢。 ● 家電用品 ● 足夠的食物和衣服，還有居所。 ● 基本糧食,生活必需品和文具等
	這些物質為甚麼不能在現有生活上得到物質 ● 因為金錢有限。 ● 貧窮 ● 財力有限，而物價持續上升
	這些物質引誘是指甚麼？ ● 是指得不到自己想要的東西而做壞事。 ● 奢侈品 ● 被取笑沒潮流物品 ● 他人
	甚麼因素可以使貧窮的人受到引誘？結果又如何？ ● 貧窮的人看到別人用些名貴的東西而自己卻因經濟問題買不起，因而受到引誘，如果選擇以犯法手段去獲得。 ● 欠債或心愛的東西面世。 ● 自卑的心理、想享受的慾望、羊群心態，如果各人會以正當與非正當手段去爭取。 ● 家人
	甚麼原因可以抗衡物質引誘 ● 買一些便宜的東西代替名貴的物品。 ● 控制自己或購買奢侈品。 ● 以其他物質代替,如沒錢唱卡拉 OK 可改於家中唱
	甚麼方法可以抗衡物質引誘 ● 可以對自己定下一個目標，當達成目標後買想要的東西或做想做的事仍為獎勵。 ● 家人灌輸之正確觀念，學校之良好教育，朋友之正面意見和自我控制，分辨對錯之能力。 ● 參與義工活動，當了解到有許多人都有著同樣情況，或可學會如何調節自我心態。 ● 控制自己,不去想該物品
6.　雖然生活在貧窮資源有限下，但能夠有更多機會學習不同的生活技巧及生存能力	貧窮與非貧窮有甚麼生活技巧及生存能力 ● 兩者有很大分別，如貧窮的人懂得買菜煮飯，打掃及照顧弟妹，但非貧窮的人有工人照顧而不懂得這些技巧。 ● 兩者所懂得的相處技巧各有不同，貧者與人合作、溝通及分享；而非貧者相對愛命令人及分配工作給他人。而貧者亦有更佳的求生技能，如煮食及家務。
	這些獨有的生活技巧及生存能力與生活在貧窮的關係 ● 它們之間的關係在於貧窮人士沒錢請工人，故要懂得以上技巧。 ● 可以把這當作「打工」。 ● 因為貧窮，故事事需親力親為，如父母外出工作時需照顧弟妹，處理家務，以減輕父母負擔，而為幫補家計會學習一技之長。 ● 在同年中學會別人不同之技巧
	這些生活技巧及生存能力是指甚麼範疇 ● 是指自我照顧 ● 照顧小孩 ● 貧者因沒有工人照顧，而家長又需工作，故要照顧弟妹，因而容易相處，其次亦因要事事親力親為，故有求生技能。 ● 生活能力：照顧先我及家人，處理家務，在無人幫助下仍可求生

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	擁有這些生活技巧及生存能力對生活在貧窮上有甚麼好處或影響 ● 好處是自己懂得照顧自己，但這失去了童年。 ● 獨立，可「打工」賺錢。 ● 因為貧窮影響著各方面,可能增強了生存能力,不用經常依靠他人。 ● 良好相處技巧使將來在工作上與同事關係和諧,有助完成工作。 ● 生活上不用依賴別人,可獨立生活,能力較同年者突出,易受賞識。 ● 可利用這些技能來幫助家人及找一份工作
7. 雖然生活在貧窮，但當中亦可以看到很多正面及積極的形象	生活在貧窮給人有甚麼的形象？正面是甚麼？負面是甚麼？ ● 負面形象是因貧窮而偷東西；正面形象是老實及力求上進。 ● 正面形象是堅強；負面是懶情和弱小。 ● 正面：努力從貧窮中掙扎求存,精神可嘉,而且態度樂觀,值得欣賞；負面：貧就是不好,沒用處及能力低 ● 正：獨立,負：缺錢 ● 正面：比其他人生存能力強,懂得做一些別人不懂的事；負面：沒錢及無能
	這些形象對生活在貧窮的人來說有甚麼形響 ● 可影響別人對你印象的第一好感度。 ● 樂觀積極地面對自己的生活,生活就會很多樣化。不需要經常怨天怨地,這樣的生活會很辛苦,又會令自己不開心。 ● 因貧窮而有感自卑,無法好好表現自己,失去升職機會。 ● 負面形象使貧者自卑,鑽牛角尖；正面形象使其更積極,創造更好生活 ● 傷害到這些人的心靈,不能得到公平對待
	那些形象是怎樣形成 ● 社會上其他人的目光。 ● 在衣著各社交方面。 ● 社會大眾訂下之價值觀成為標準,為不同人訂下了所謂之形象 ● 他人感覺 ● 別人的眼光和想法
	期望重建生活在貧窮的正面形象是甚麼？ ● 都是努力的人 ● 堅強、努力和有上進心。 ● 和常人一般 ● 積極和不畏艱苦之形象 ● 我們的成績可以和富裕的學生一樣
	有甚麼因素可以重建或破壞正面的形象 ● 犯罪 ● 重建：洗心革面和建立正確之價值觀和人生觀；破壞：誤入歧途,受物質引誘而犯法
	有甚麼方法可以重建正面的形象 ● 把好的一面展現給別人。 ● 用心去做好每一件事,無需理會別人看法。 ● 重建：做正當行為,如參與義務工作；破壞：做出犯罪行為 ● 發揭更多生活貧窮之人才
	建立了正面的形象與現在有甚麼不同 ● 受人尊重對將來成長有幫助 ● 不會被人看低
8. 現時社會出現的貧富懸殊問題，政府有甚麼政策去解決這個問題	大家所睇到的貧富懸殊是指甚麼？在那一方面呈現出來？ ● 意指貧者越貧,富者越富,這從調查中呈現出來。 ● 現實社會至於貧富懸殊。 ● 富與貧的差距太大,例如在飲食上有的可以大吃大喝,剩下許多廚餘,但貧者則只可滿足基本需要。 ● 是指貧的人非常貧窮,生活困難,有錢人生活環境很好
	這個現象是否每一個人也認同及察覺到 ● 這現象並非每一個人也認同及察覺到。 ● 大家都發覺,故貧者正努力追求上進,爭取更多的需要。 ● 非所有人都看到,因各人之生活環境未必常接觸到以上資訊,難以深入感受
	造成貧富懸殊的原因及因此而有甚麼影響及造成的問題 ● 因為社會問題,導致貧窮的人越來越多。 ● 因資源分配不平均,故貧者越貧,富者越富,造成大家不滿而犯罪。 ● 原因複雜,會導致社會不平衡,貧者因而對政府感到不滿,從而怨恨或遷怒於富者。

| | ● 富者把貧者之金錢取走, 故貧者生活越見艱苦 |
| | ● 因政治問題, 造成貧窮人士生活困難, 難以生存 |

有甚麼方法政府可以解決貧富懸殊
- 政府可增加更多資源幫助貧窮的人。
- 政府應了解貧者真正的需要, 再作出針對性措施。
- 財政預算案的其中一條會向每一位香港市民派發$6000, 這是一件好事, 但政府可以想一想把這$6000 派給更有需要的人, 例如長者。這樣可以減輕政府的負擔, 亦可使他們買到需要的東西。但如果派給有錢人, 他們只會覺得突然多了$6000, 用來買沒用的東西。
- 制定合適政策, 但知易行難
- 給予貧者更多機會

你自己有甚麼方法可以解決貧富懸殊
- 捐款給有需要的人
- 發表意見
- 把書讀好

解決了貧富懸殊的社會是怎樣
- 社會會變得平等。
- 人人平等, 沒有人需要再為錢而煩惱。
- 比較和諧, 社會紛爭也相應減少, 較為安寧
- 每個人都是平等

- 不能解決人無限的欲望
- 向富者徵收大量稅款, 轉派貧窮或有需要的人。
- 政治和利益問題
- 沒有了窮人, 大家都開心因為有錢人不願意失去某部分東西

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