

A Qualitative Study of the Post-80 Generation in Career Development Realm in Hong Kong, China

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ABSTRACT

The transition from school to work is a critical milestone in the life of young people and plays a crucial role in how their future careers develop. This transition is a complicated process which not only involves a change of identity from a learner to a worker, but also a transition from adolescence to adulthood where one's life planning is at stake. This paper examines the views of young Chinese in relation to career development in a society where East meets West. The study is a qualitative research with an in-depth semi-structured interview approach to explore the career concerns and issues faced by the post-80 generation in Hong Kong. Data is collected in audiotaped individual interviews with 10 young people aged 18 to 24. The sample is selected purposively in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds and thematic analysis is used to explore a number of key themes including ideas about career development, readiness for continuing education, constraints to career planning, gender differences in acceptance of cross-border work and overtime work, and single child problem for career development. The findings revealed insights on the career development of the post-80 generation and the interplay of ecological system in the Hong Kong context. Practical measures to facilitate a better transition to young adulthood were discussed in the paper as well. The insights from this study would be useful for human resource practitioners, policy makers and interested parties who together can jointly devise appropriate career interventions to assist young people in their transition to adulthood.

Keywords: Career development, lived experience, post-80 generation, ecological system

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 2 April 2015

Accepted: 19 May 2016

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INTRODUCTION

Youths are in a critical period of identity formation during which they separate from their family of origin and develop a sense of the self through their interactions with others in new social relationships in the

wider society (Erikson, 1968; Kroger, 1996; Henderson et al., 2007). The transition from school to work is a critical milestone in the lives of young people and plays a crucial role in how their future careers develop. This transition is a complicated process which not only involves a change of identity from a learner to a worker, but also a transition from adolescence to adulthood where one's life planning is at stake.

CHANGING SOCIOECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES AND THE POST-80 GENERATION IN HONG KONG

In the mainland China, the post-80s generation is a product of one-child policy. The media has portrayed the single-child families as "4-2-1 syndrome", namely four grandparents and two parents pouring their attentions onto one child (Wu, 1997). They are regarded as a spoiled generation with best available education and electronic gadgets (Stanat, 2006). In contrast, as a Special Administrative Region of China, Hong Kong was in the administrative transition and unaffected by the one-child policy with its post-80s generation raised in an era when it was on the road to affluence. This generation has not encountered poverty, unlike their. As shown by statistics on the proportion of youths living with parent(s), the proportion of the generation living with parent(s) rose from 86.3% in 1996 to 94.6% in 2011 (Census & Statistics Department, 2013). There is a trend of prolonged 'adolescence' as young people become more financially dependent on their parents (Hong Kong Federation of Youth

Groups, 2006a). Continued education, employment, Chinese cultural factors, economic concerns and housing issues all contributed to young people's prolonged financial dependency on families (Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups 2006a, 2013). Therefore, the research on post-80s generation in mainland China cannot be generalised to its counterparts in Hong Kong.

This younger generation has also been the main beneficiaries of the expansion of higher education 1990s in Hong Kong as the colonial government spent more resources on education to tackle the problem of 'brain drain' due to handover of sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997 and to enhance the workforce for the structural transformation of the economy. The number of subsidised university places quadrupled within a decade. Owing to the increased post-secondary education opportunities in the past 10 years, the youth population with post-secondary education increased substantially both in number and in their share of the population. In 2001, 173,225 youths (or 19.5% of the youth population) had attended post-secondary education and the number reached 338,301 (or 39.3% of the youth population) in 2011 (Census & Statistics Department, 2013). The development of the economy created more employment opportunities for young people. However, the occupational progress made by young people lag behind the pace of the expansion of higher education (Wu, 2010). As a result, it was more difficult for college degree holders in 2006 to find a managerial

or professional job than it would have been a decade ago.

The number of Hong Kong residents working in the mainland territory has been on the rise according to the survey conducted by the Census & Statistics Department of Hong Kong (2011) over the past years. The figures show a rise, from around 157,000 in 1998 to 175,000 in 2010. With the increasing pace of globalisation of the world economy, the mobility of workforce resources becomes a key factor. Creating international awareness among youth and enabling them to become multi-talent mobile workers so as to adapt to the changing work environment are a matter of concern to the government.

There is rising concern regarding young people who are not (N) in education (E), employment (E) or training (T), i.e. the so-called 'NEET generation' (Inui, 2005; Pemberton, 2008; Yates & Payne, 2006; Yuji, 2007). Hong Kong has been regarded as a world city and one of the wealthiest societies in the world in terms of per capita GDP. However, some young people do not share the fruit of economic growth and prosperity. In 2010, 7 per cent of the 837,700 young persons in Hong Kong were non-engaged or not employed. The proportion of NEET youths in the total youth population have fluctuated in tandem with the changes in the level of youth unemployment and overall unemployment (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2012). Concerns have been raised that this group of young people are at higher risks of developing poor mental health and becoming involved in criminal activity (Ngai, 2007).

Against a background and unique context of Hong Kong, the post-80s generation is confronted with many career-related issues. The social and economic environment young people now face and their unique experience in terms of upbringing may have inculcated in the post-80s generation different attitude to work and career aspirations (Yip, 2012). Young people have to adjust to a work environment and resolve issues regarding their career direction and manage life demands in their transition to adulthood. They have to manage such career-related tasks in the midst of family and peer expectations. The stress in managing the career-related tasks can be regarded as career concerns (Super et al., 1996). Career concerns of young adults show their worry about a current task and career development (Code & Bernes, 2006). It is understandable that different generations have different values and preferences towards work attitudes and work environment (Yi et al., 2010) and they have to be motivated in new ways (Lynton & Thogerson, 2010). For the human resource practitioners, the study provides insights into what could be the most effective approach to developing the ambitions of young people in Hong Kong. For example, the human resources practitioners can acknowledge their roles in helping the transitions of young people from school to work. By understanding young people's career concerns such as job security, inadequacies at work, importance of intrinsic rewards, gender differences in acceptance of cross-border work and overtime work for career development among others, human resource management

can take these into account in recruitment and succession planning as well as motivate and retain this group of young people in the labour market.

Although many studies have been conducted on generation Y (Bynner, 2001; Raffe, 2003; Alan, 2007; Henderson et al., 2007; Vinken, 2007; Jones, 2009; Twenge & Campbell, 2008) in the western countries and in mainland China, there is a dearth of work of research that explores the experience of their Hong Kong counterparts in the career development realm (Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 2006a, 2013; Wu, 2010; Yip et al. 2011), particularly among Hong Kong Chinese, a gap this paper is designed to address. This research paper aims to add to existing literature on young people in Hong Kong. It aims to fill the gaps in our understanding of the concerns of the post-80s generation in relation to their career aspirations, need for continuing education, constraints in career development, differences in choices in cross-border work and overtime work and concerns of single child between career choice and family responsibility. Such themes were not explored by previous studies in Hong Kong. The eco-systemic approach adds to the literature as the complex eco-system of personal ability, class background, gender, educational attainment, ethnic status and identity, labour market and family resources impact on the life chances and career development of young people. The eco-systemic approach can be used to analyse the constraints and opportunities for young people in transition

to career development in a local context. To conclude, this study examines two research questions: First, what are the career concerns and problems that the post-80s generation in Hong Kong may encounter? Second, what are the opportunities and measures that can assist young people for better transition to career development?

AIM OF STUDY

This study seeks to explore the career concerns and issues faced by the post-80s generation in Hong Kong. By examining the lived experiences of a group of young people from Hong Kong in the career development realm, this study could provide a picture of career-related challenges and opportunities that they may encounter in a changing global world.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative research with semi-structured individual interview design with a view to obtaining a deeper understanding of the post-80s generation's lived experience and concerns about their career development. This study provides useful input for human resource management and policy agenda that can, where needed, assist young people for better transition to career development.

Sample

The sample of this study was selected purposively so as to gain an insight and understanding through interviews with youths coming from some very different walks of life. Ten interviewees were identified

from a survey on the basis of their replies and willingness to be interviewed individually. They were selected from a subset of youth participants from a survey of 1,132 respondent returns (the survey related to the young people's perceptions on family-building conducted between 2009 and 2012 by the researcher) as willing to engage in an interview in order to explore more deeply their views on career development. A total of 10 young people were interviewed as they were representative of some key characteristic of the post-80s youth profile based on the statistics of the Hong Kong 2006 Population By-census Report (Census & Statistics Department, 2006). There were several criteria for selecting the above sample of youth purposively. First, regarding gender, the sex ratio of the youth population (Census & Statistics Department, 2006) is relatively evenly distributed. Based on the statistics shown, the selection of gender was 5 female and 5 male for the 10 interviewees in the qualitative individual interviews. Second, there is greater chances for education available to the Hong Kong youth population. However, improved education does not necessarily mean more employment opportunities. Unemployment rates have been increasing in the past decade among young people, especially the post-80s and post-90s generations, even those with tertiary education. Hence, it was important to select some interviewees with higher education (degree or above) and with lower education level (junior high school or below) respectively to elicit their views on career development in the context of

socio-economic background. Third, from the By-census 2006, a large proportion of working youths were engaged as service workers and retail workers (29.4%) and clerks (27.9%) in 2006. Youths were highly represented in these occupations and hence, some respondents were chosen from these occupations. Fourth, with regard to the median monthly income from the main employment of youths, the census in 2006 showed that it decreased by 13.3% over the past 10 years, from HK\$7,500 in 1996 to HK\$6,500 in 2006. By contrast, the median monthly income from the main employment of the working population increased by 5.3%. The median monthly income from main employment of working youths in 2006 was about 65% of that of the whole working population. Since the earnings of young people relative to the general working population have been declining over time, it was considered important to select for the interviews youth representing disparities of income. Fifth, Hong Kong as a world city and with the integration with mainland China since 1997, more and more people undertake cross-border work in order to earn a living and for better work prospects. Additionally, with intense competition brought about by globalisation, more and more people pursue further studies or work overtime with a view to maintaining their competitiveness. Hence, cross-border work, overtime work and continuing education may be significant factors affecting the work life and career development of the post-80s generation. As such, respondents who were chosen for interviews were

known to be undertake cross-border work, overtime work and continuing education. Sixth, there is a group of persons with no jobs, no study and receiving social welfare assistance. Such 'hidden youths' often withdraw from and neglected by the community. Prolonged unemployment is known to be associated with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and poor health among youth (Bjarnason & Sigurdardottir, 2003; Mossakowski, 2009). Hong Kong has 1,418,200 youths aged 15-29 representing 20% of the total population (Census & Statistics Department 2010a). However, young people face high unemployment rates. The 2010 unemployment rates (July-Sept) for the 15-19 and 20-24 age groups was 21.7% and 13.6% respectively, while the rate for the general population during the same period was only 4.4% (Census & Statistics Department, 2010b). Higher unemployment rates, lower starting salaries and insecure jobs have put many young people in disadvantaged positions, protracting the transition from school to work and from childhood to adulthood and alienating them from society generally. Hence, young people from this background were targeted and included in the interviews. Lastly, as a Special Administrative Region of China, there are quite a number of new arrivals from the mainland who come to Hong Kong for family reunion or for life improvement. The vulnerability of youth is often associated with some social characteristic such as immigration status, particularly in view of the various adjustment issues encountered by newly

arrived youngsters. Issues related to new immigrants who have been previously living under the Communist regime need further study to see whether there are any differences in their values and attitudes towards career development. Here, we define these new immigrants as arrivals from mainland China to Hong Kong and who have been living in the latter for a period of less than seven years. Returnees from overseas after their study were also one of the target sub samples who might provide different insights into their career plans in the context of global and local culture and values.

Hence, five categories were created based on the selected youths' socio-economic backgrounds, namely gender, educational attainment, job status and working conditions, income and immigration status. The five types consisted of (a) those with low skills and academic achievement with low income (i.e. less than the median monthly income of youth from main employment - HK\$8,000 in 2011) (C&SD, 2013); (b) those with high skills level, high academic achievement and high income; (c) those undertaking cross-border work, overtime work or with continuing education; (d) those with no jobs, no study and no training (the so-called 'NEET generation'); and (e) new arrivals to Hong Kong from mainland China, or returnees from overseas study. They ranged in age from 18 to 24. Five were males and five were females. In this study, youths or young people (these are used interchangeably) refer to those aged 15 to 24 for both sexes.

Data Collection

Before the interviews, the subjects were sent via post an invitation letter together with a consent form and an information sheet with a brief introduction to the research

project. Participants were asked to sign the consent forms agreeing to participate. The interviews were conducted in private settings convenient to the participants, i.e. the researcher's office and coffee shop.

Table 1
Characteristics of Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Current Status	Educational Level	Remarks
Lok	23	Male	Drawing class tutor	Secondary 5	Low monthly income (around HK\$3,000) and limited occupational skills
Irene	19	Female	Programme assistant in a welfare agency	Secondary 5	Low monthly income (HK\$6,500) and limited occupational skills
Victor	24	Male	Management trainee	Bachelor degree in public administration	High monthly income (HK\$24,000) with professional qualification and undertook overtime work (around 15 hours per week) and also continuing education (following a banking course 10 hours per week).
Abi	24	Female	Secondary school teacher	Bachelor degree in education	High monthly income (HK\$24,000) with professional qualification and worked overtime (around 15 hours per week)
Ken	19	Male	Dog trainer	Secondary 4	Undertaking cross border work (went to the mainland China 1-2 times per week) and overtime work (around 10 hours per week)
Blossom	24	Female	Private housing management officer	Post-secondary education	With continuing education (taking management course 6 hours per week) and overtime work (around 25 hours per week)
Ting	21	Male	Not in education, employment or training	Secondary 5	Few tangible connections with the local community, had no paid employment, was not studying and had no income
Ching	18	Female	Not in education, employment or training	Secondary 5	Few tangible connections with the local community, had no paid employment, was not studying and had no income
Chak	23	Male	Printing machine assembler	Secondary 5	He had migrated from the mainland China in the last 3 years
Portia	22	Female	Student	University Year 1 student (major in Geography)	A single child, overseas returnee from US

The interview environments were safe, comfortable and relaxing. The interviews lasted 60 to 75 minutes, were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The questions were asked in Cantonese on the subjects' career aspirations and plan, and factors affecting their transition from a dependent youth to a completely independent adult in terms of career development. The major questions included "Do you have any career plan or career aspirations?", "Why do/ don't you have a career plan?", "What are your career concerns?", "What kind of difficulties do you encounter when you start your career?", "Do you accept/ undertake cross-border work or overtime work? How far does cross-border work or overtime work affect your career development?", "Do you have any continuing education after work? How important continuing education would affect your career plan or development?", and "What policies, measures or service provision can facilitate or help you develop your career?"

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed in this study as it is a commonly used method (Davies, 2007; Bryman, 2008) that identifies themes or patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was used to seek qualitative insights in relation to the predetermined categories of discussion in a systematic and replicable manner. Overall, the thematic structure reflected the frequency of material that addressed the lived experience of the Post-80s Generation in Career Development Realm in Hong Kong. In this instance, the

method adopted was the six-stage model of Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first phase, the researcher becomes familiar with data by reading all of the transcripts and field notes which assists in grasping broad patterns. The next stage involves initial coding and being reflexive about my own assumptions and views and to be open about these in the analytic process. In phase three, the codes are grouped into potential themes and compared and connections traced. These clusters of initial themes and sub-themes are organised into an initial thematic map. Phase four entails reviewing, refining and reducing these themes. This process involves going back and forth between these different stages in a recursive process. Phase five entails a fresh comparison both within and across themes in order to generate their shared and dissonant features and to establish links that help grasp the systemic aspects of the perspectives of the respondents. In the final stage, the themes are defined in ways that capture the core of the theme and its relationship with the overall narrative on data and its analysis.

Regarding reliability of this qualitative research, pre-test of the interview schedule was conducted among three youth samples to ensure each respondent understood the questions in the same way and that answers could be coded without the possibility of uncertainty. Reliability in this study was also addressed by using standardised methods to write field notes and prepare transcripts. The researcher followed the conventional contrastive procedure of taking field notes as well as audio-taping and drafting the

transcripts of the individual interviews and comparing both sources to help ensure the reliability of the study. This study also addresses the issue of validity by taking data and findings back to the 10 interviewees for verification.

FINDINGS

The themes identified from data describing participants' experience and views on career development are outlined below:

Theme 1: Career Aspirations were based on Young People's Preferred Value and Belief, Primary Interest, Job Stability and Income Trajectory over Time

A few respondents in this group had some idea about career development. In the interviews, some interviewees had career aspirations except for those with no job, no income and not involved in the study. They wanted to climb a career ladder with various career aspirations such as being a designer, social worker, senior bank manager, a professional dog trainer, a human resources officer and a beautician among others. Their choice of career practices was based on reasons such as their preferred value and belief, primary interest in the specific occupation, career availability and job stability, and the income trajectory over time.

I would like to seize every chance to get promoted to the middle management in a few years and getting higher salary in return... Actually I don't like routine jobs. I

want more exposure and prospects in my career. (Victor)

It should be noted that one young adult was not satisfied with doing a job just for financial gain but was primarily attracted to the intrinsic rewards of a career.

Because I love it (design). The second reason is that I do not want to do a job just for a living... oh! I want to do a job that I enjoy, ah... with a sense of achievement... and a sense of satisfaction... (Lok)

Theme 2: Young People Pursue Continuing Education to Remain Competitive at Workforce

It is relevant to note the influence of globalisation which emphasises a fast and keen competitive culture, in which one may have to pursue further education to remain competitive. Some interviewees have indicated that they have pursued or had plans for continuing education. They felt the need for continuing education in order to remain competitive. Those with undergraduate qualifications would study for a Master's degree or related qualifications in order to find or keep a career on track.

There is more competition. As a teacher, you have to get many qualifications and licenses, you have to learn Putonghua... (Abi) Now I'm studying CFA (Chartered Financial Analyst) and preparing for examination for this profession...

Though I feel tired sometimes I hope to have career achievement before 30, I have many continuing education plans for the near future.
(Victor)

Those without an undergraduate degree tended to study for other applied courses such as human resource management or an art course delivered by a private organisation in order to gain better employment prospects. Some interviewees realised the importance of continuing education in maintaining their competitiveness in the workplace. As more people enter the job market with higher qualifications, they find that they had to re-equip themselves in order to reach their goals or stay competitive in their particular labour market. Thus, Victor, a banking trainee at a local bank wanted to gain professional qualifications in banking and an MBA before the age of 30, while Blossom, an officer at a real estate management company, wanted to study for a human resource management course in order to climb up the career ladder. Ken, 19, and a dog trainer was a high school dropout who did not enjoy school work but changed his mind after working several years in different jobs and acknowledged the importance of qualifications. He planned to save enough money to acquire a professional qualification and licence in dog training.

Theme 3 - Constraints to Career Development

Sub-theme: Declining or Relocation of Industries Increase Uncertainty in Career Prospect

Some young adults were uncertain about their futures in the fast growing economy of Hong Kong whereby many factories had moved to mainland China because of lower operating costs. Chak was a fairly recent immigrant from the mainland and worked in a printing factory and unsure of his career prospects as many similar factories had moved to the nearby Guangdong province of China where production costs (notably labour) were cheaper.

We are worried that this industry could disappear suddenly. This year, the number of printing factories is much smaller. Many factories moved across the border. (Chak)

Sub-theme: Unstable Contract-based Employment Affected Longer-term Career Planning of Young People

It is noteworthy that nowadays many young adults are not confident about their career prospects as their jobs are mostly on fixed term contract basis (Wu, 2010). They were not sure whether these contracts would be renewed, which in turn affected their longer-term career planning. Abi was a good example of this dilemma, feeling uncertain in employment:

In the past, there were permanent posts, but now many teachers have

been employed on a contract term basis... The principal may say one day that the school needs to cut staff redundancy because of low birth rate. In fact, there is much uncertainty. (Abi)

Sub-theme: Lack of Resources and Financial Support Hindered Young People to Pursue Continuing Education and Career Training, and to Run a Business on Their Own

Such constraints were encountered by the interviewees in pursuing their career plans who spoke of high tuition fees and time commitments. Blossom, a private housing management officer indicated that she has hardly enough time to pursue continuing education because she had to work overtime. Irene, a programme assistant at a non-government organisation, wanted to be a social worker but she worried about the high tuition fees for a professional qualification. The travelling expense was another consideration as she could not afford to go far beyond their local district to pursue training opportunities located elsewhere. The following outlines her perception of constraints to further study:

Further study depends on money! A degree or sub-degree social work course costs over HK\$50,000 a year. I need to save enough money before re-entering university to study the course... I think that the transport costs should be lower... (Irene)

Some young people like Irene would like to start a business. However, it is argued that the labour retail market was dominated largely by big conglomerates and that it was very difficult or impossible for young people to develop their entrepreneurial skills by setting up small businesses. Young adults with no financial support could not pursue their own business interests or develop related skills.

... Dream? I once dreamt of starting a small business, but in Hong Kong it would be very difficult because the shopping malls are all controlled by big enterprises... (Irene)

For this group of young people, Ting and Ching were in the NEET status. Being in the NEET status did not seem to be interesting. Ting who had no job, no income and was not in education did not have any career plans and held little hope for the future having a history of brief employments, poor interpersonal relationship at workplace, complicated working environment, tiring tasks, and poor health etc.

I have worked as an assistant cook in a bar but I cannot stay long on the job. I changed to another job to deliver meals in a fast food shop. But I resigned a month later 'cos I have bad relationship with my colleagues. Now I am unemployed for several months. The district I live in has a lack of working opportunities... I worry about the family expenditure. My mom was

unemployed recently and my father is a security man with low salary. I don't want to be a financial burden to my family. (Ting)

Interviewees with low education and low skills generally had trouble finding jobs easily. Ting and Ching, both Secondary 5 school leavers, had been unemployed for several years and relied on parental financial support. They always stayed at home, playing computer games and seldom engaged directly with other people and lacked communication and interpersonal relationship skills.

Unsurprisingly, those who failed in the competitive school system and found no way to compensate for this had much more difficulty in climbing up the social ladder (see Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 2006a, 2013). Ting's family was poor and could not support him in career training. He was not sure of his area of interest and had no money to pursue further study.

(on future career plan) I have not thought of it... Now I have no further study because I have little money.' (Ting)

Sub-theme: Sexual Harassment and Discrimination Affected Career Adjustment

Although women are legally protected against discrimination under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance in Hong Kong,

nearly 30% of people thought that sexual harassment against female employees were common in the workplace in Hong Kong, according to a survey by Women's Commission (2010). A female respondent who worked in a male-dominated property management industry indicated that she had to deal with many male clients and professionals whose behaviour was annoying and threatening. Because of frequent sexual harassments, she had planned to change her job.

Those around age 40 and thereabouts are very interested in young ladies of my age, regardless of whether the young ladies are beautiful or not. I can be easily their love target... They would like to touch you...ugh! (Blossom)

Historically, many of the new arrivals from mainland China have lacked adequate education and skills and could only take up low-skilled jobs (Siu, 1999). As a result of the influx of young One-way Permit holders from the mainland over the past 10 years, there were more youths who were born in the mainland of China/Macao/Taiwan. The percentage rose from 16.2% in 2001 to 21.9% in 2011. Chak claimed that this led to problems of discrimination against him as a new immigrant in the work place.

When I came to Hong Kong, I cannot speak Cantonese... I face discrimination by others... Even the customers would avoid approaching

me when they know that I speak Putonghua. They know I'm coming from China. (Chak)

Theme 4: Differences in Gender, Income and Educational Levels had Different Choices in Cross-border Work and Overtime Work for Career Development

Some male interviewees accepted cross-border work for reasons such as overseas working experiences and career exposure that in turn increased their opportunities especially in the expanding labour markets of contemporary China. Victor was an example. He was an ambitious young adult eager to enhance his career prospects.

I am very willing to do so or maybe I should say I am very eager to have the opportunity to work across the border, or in USA or in ... because this would be a good opportunity for training and bringing benefits to my career. (Victor)

Conversely, some female interviewees did not indicate an interest in cross-border work because they wanted to stay near their parents or were not attracted to what they perceived as lower standards of living in some parts of the mainland China compared with Hong Kong.

Cross-border work... it is very difficult for me to accept it because all my family members are in Hong Kong. I do not want to leave my family members... (Irene)

In addition, interviewees with higher income, higher educational level and higher skill were more willing to accept overtime than those with lower income, lower educational level and lower skill levels. The latter were less satisfied about career opportunities and preferred to have more leisure time and private leisure activities with family members or friends. Thus Victor, a highly ambitious young man working as a bank trainee, accepted overtime work from 9:00 am often until 20:00 pm. He was also opposed to the enactment of legislation on maximum working hours by the Government believing this would hinder his career development.

For social justice, the enactment of legislation on maximum hours is to protect the lower working class. But I don't support the enactment of legislation applying to me as I need to work hard in spite of overtime work in order to meet the work quota. (Victor)

Theme 5: Single Child's Problem to Keep a Balance between Career Choice and Family Responsibility

Portia is a typical case of a single child who in future sees herself supporting her parents. She worries about how to cope with this responsibility when they retire and age. As a single child, she considers that she has to sacrifice her dream of being a coach and has to find a decent job to support her parents.

Portia (a returnee from overseas study):

I want to be a coach to teach young people the knowledge and skills in adventure-based programmes. But I think it is only a dream. I can't take it up as a future full-time job as the income is not stable. I'm the single child and when my father retires one day, my salary equates to their income. I can't be so selfish to pursue my own interests. I need to consider my responsibility to care for them when they get older. I need to find a job with a stable and good salary.

DISCUSSION

Interviews with these young people revealed some crucial information for further discussion. Some important findings and issues raised with implications for human resources are listed below:

An Eco-Systemic Framework Analysis

The finding of this study indicates that an eco-systemic framework proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1974; 1979; 1989; 1993) could be used for understanding the situation of the sampled youths and help inform the analysis of the respondents' subjective life experiences in career realm as shown in the diagram. Ecological systems theory (Segall et al., 1999; Crawford & Walker, 2007) places the individual with his/her personal qualities and abilities e.g. sex, age, health, character etc. interacting actively

with the environment, structured in terms of different levels of the microsystem, the mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem represents the face-to-face interactions with the immediate, physical or social, surroundings. It also includes institutions such as the family, school, hospital, church and so forth. The mesosystem reflects the linkages between two or more of these settings. The exosystem comprises such linkages with settings of which the individual is not a part, but that nevertheless exert an influence. The macrosystem is equal to culture in that it consists of values and belief systems. The framework highlights that the developing individual cannot be isolated from the immediate and wider social context, and that interactions are reciprocal (Segall et al., 1999). In this study, the ecosystem is utilised to examine the barriers at different levels of the ecosystem and the possible effects on the career development of the youth.

Using Bronfenbrenner's model of development to explain young people's career development would enable us to break down the many barriers that the researcher has found in this study. For example, when looking at the constraints surrounding career development of the respondents (Theme 3: Constraints to Career Development) at the micro and mesosystem level, young people from poor and lower educational backgrounds typically had little in the way of academic qualifications or financial support from family to entertain career development, such as undertaking further and costly study in career training. Youths

from single-child family (Theme 5: Single Child Problem to Keep a Balance Between Career Choice and Family Responsibility) or newly arrived youths from mainland China (Theme 3: Constraints to Career Development) also had problems as sole supporters of their parents or in gaining work because of discrimination against them as a new immigrant.

At the exo-system level, those living in remote areas such as new towns in Hong Kong found it difficult to travel long and expensive distances to urban centres to attend courses that might advance career development (Theme 3: Constraints to Career Development). The trend of unstable contract-based or freelance jobs in the local community also affected long-term career planning of the youths as they were unsure whether these contracts would be renewed (Theme 3: Constraints to Career Development).

At the macrosystem level, some interviewees pursued or had plans for continuing education in order to remain competitive in today's knowledge-based economy (Theme 2: Young People Pursue Continuing Education to Remain Competitive at Workforce). They had different career aspirations which were partly affected by their preferred values and beliefs (Theme 1: Choice of Career Aspirations). For some interviewees, without resources to start a small business and having to compete with big enterprises, there was little hope in self-actualising their ambitions at the macro-system competitive market level, (Theme 3: Constraints to Career Development).

The global and socio-economic changes over the past 20 years have led to the decline or relocation of industries from Hong Kong to the mainland China, cross-border work and overtime work which can be witnessed

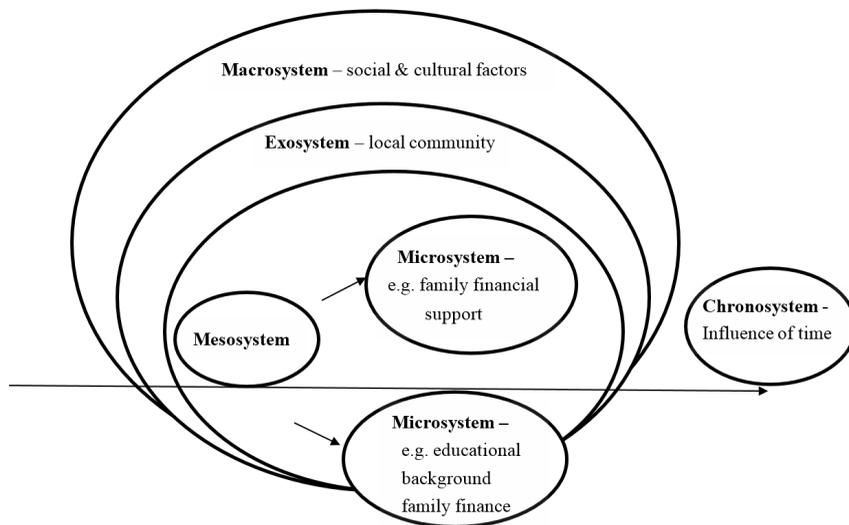


Figure 1. Diagram of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems (Crawford & Walker, 2007)

in the young people's career development through the chronosystem (Theme 4: Differences in Gender, Income and Educational Levels had Different Choices in Cross-border Work and Overtime Work for Career Development) affecting the work pattern of the younger generation. Thus, an eco-systemic analysis provides researchers, the managerial sector and policy-makers with valuable insights into the complexity and interplay of the ecologies of young people in career development, from micro to the chronosystem level.

Those young people without a job, or income, or desirable qualifications, or who have poor interpersonal skills, or were living some way from urban centres where jobs or training might exist, were particularly ill equipped for self or career development to face the future with hope. The influx of low skilled migrant labour from mainland China also reduced chances of work for Hong Kong youths who are less qualified. In contrast, those with higher educational attainment had more concrete and ambitious career plans in mind that might include gaining new professional qualifications. The complex eco-system of personal ability, class background, gender, educational attainment, ethnic status and identity, labour market and family resources have an impact on the life chances and career development of the participants.

To conclude, the eco-systemic approach can provide a comprehensive framework to analyse the constraints and opportunities for young people in transition to career development in a local context. This

approach suggests that the social and environmental influences are significant contributing factors in young people's career development. Nevertheless, this approach tends to lack a global perspective that can capture the influence of wider effects such as the likely impact of global values and competitive culture of late modernity on individual career aspiration, career choices or work life styles and patterns. It is suggested to deploy a mix of concepts combining the eco-systemic approach and late modern notion of reflexive biographies for further research, in order to capture something of the orientation of youth today.

Young People Voices to Address their Career Concerns

Under a competitive global economy, many young adults feel the need to pursue further education in order to maintain their competitive edge or to be employable. Those without resources may be left behind. As we have seen above, there are a number of complex inter-weaving factors which affect the career development of young people.

In this research, Ting, being in the NEET, indicated that he would welcome training in interpersonal relationships and interviewing skills. It is likely that some disadvantaged young adults will need basic training in developing social skills, particularly in the way they relate to people when seeking a job. "There was little mention of job searching skills at school" (Ting).

As young adults enter the job market, they may not be confident of their abilities,

for example, in leading a team composed of older staff. Human resources management may consider providing suitable coaching and training to young people. Blossom, a private housing management officer, suggested that the NGOs or the Government could provide interpersonal relationship courses or stress management courses to help the younger generation tackle the adversities they face. She suggested the private sectors could employ social workers to provide counselling services or stress management courses for employees. Victor was fortunate to find a job with a higher rank and income (compared with peers), but had the following challenges in the early part of his career. "You have to know how to lead a team, that is, you should be capable of motivating the team to work..." (Victor).

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

From a research perspective, it appears that the single child issue has been misunderstood. Previous studies on single child issue have suggested that single child was being 'spoilt' and dependent (Fong, 2004; Stanat, 2006). But this research finds that single child such as Portia had to sacrifice her own career aspiration in order to support her elderly parents. She had to shoulder a heavier family responsibility. This is a subject needing further research.

From the human resources perspective, it is also necessary to acknowledge role of companies and firms in helping the transitions of young people from school to work. As revealed by the respondents

in this study, the transitions from school to work have become more precarious and unstable than before (Wu, 2010) as there are many challenges facing this group of young people. Their career concerns such as job insecurity, inadequacies at work, readiness for continuing education, importance of intrinsic rewards, lack of time and money for further study, sexual harassment and discrimination at workplace are all important issues for human resources practitioners in order to motivate and retain this group of young people. The gender differences in acceptance of cross-border work and overtime work for career development are also important for human resources management to take into account in recruitment and succession planning. It may also be advisable for human resources practitioners to help set up formal career system whereby young recruits can discuss their career aspirations or problems. For the smaller companies with fewer than 100 employees, supervisors can help young people to set goals through informal counselling or mentoring. Smaller organisations should also consider offering employees studying opportunities through sponsorship to external courses as young people may be ready for continuing education (Lau & Pang, 2000).

The findings from this study contributed to the understanding of the lived experiences of young people in career development realm in Hong Kong. The complex ecosystem of personal ability, class and ethnic status and identity, gender, educational level, work market and family support

and resources brought constraints and opportunities for career development of the post-80s generation. The findings suggested that social and environmental influences were significant contributing factors in young people's career development. This qualitative study has provided insights into the experience of post-80s generation in Hong Kong and these insights can be viewed as a first step or reference for human resources practitioners or interested parties in mapping effective strategies in recruitment and career development of youths.

The study has its limitations. Since this a preliminary study on youth's perceptions on career concern and issues, individual interview approach with a small size and purposive sample has weak generalisations in qualitative analysis as data may be less representative. Despite its limitations, the study can provide a springboard for further research.

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