

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# The family structural and socioeconomic characteristics of the family well-being of Hong Kong people

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**Abstract**

This study investigated the family well-being of Hong Kong people through a randomized telephone survey of 2008 adults, using a standardized six-domain index developed specifically for this population. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the heterogeneity of family well-being according to demographic, family structural, and socioeconomic characteristics. The results showed significant gender and age differences in people's perception of family well-being. Education, family income, and hiring a domestic helper were also associated with higher family wellbeing index scores, while the impacts of economic activity status, family size, and caring for young children were found to be insignificant. The impact of marital status was somewhat complicated. This article discusses variations observed in the influence of the set of demographic, family structural, and socioeconomic characteristics on overall and domain-specific family well-being. Implications for future studies and for social policy formulation and social work practice are suggested.

**KEYWORDS**

domestic helper, family wellbeing index, family structural characteristics, gender and age difference, socioeconomic factors

**INTRODUCTION**

Findings on well-being and related topics such as “happiness,” “quality of life,” and “life satisfaction” have been abundant since the mid-1980s. Economists have revealed the “happiness-income paradox” and the inadequacy of using purely economic indicators to gauge societal development (Easterlin et al., 2010; Layard, 2005). To identify keys to human well-being and social progress, countries and international organizations have developed sets of statistical indicators to monitor national well-being and make cross-nation comparisons (Dalziel, 2019; Sanchez-Sanchez, 2017). In such comparisons, “family” has been found to be one important aspect of well-being, especially in Asian countries (Krys et al., 2021). In recent decades, scholars from multiple disciplines have deepened and

extended the individual perspective on well-being and gradually widened their interest to include family centered approaches (Summers et al., 2005; Wollny et al., 2010). The evidence suggests that family well-being contributes to the fundamental well-being of each member, the neighborhood, and society as a whole (McCalman et al., 2018; Swords et al., 2013).

The pursuit of family well-being thus concerns not only individuals, but also policymakers and helping professionals who share the mission of promoting individual and family well-being through family-friendly policies and social services (Zimmerman, 2013). An increasing number of nationwide projects have been launched to measure, study, and track changes in family well-being, to generate evidence for policy formulation and service planning. Some prominent examples are:

the development of comprehensive indexes to measure family well-being in the United States (Martinez et al., 2003), Malaysia (Noor et al., 2014), and Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2022); the longitudinal tracking of family well-being in Australia (McCalman et al., 2018) and New Zealand (Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit, 2018); and a feature study of the well-being of low-income families in Ireland (Swords et al., 2013). These studies have contributed significant context-specific measurements (both objective and subjective) of family well-being by presenting a general picture of family well-being in a region and tracking change over time, and by pointing out the importance of social contexts in constructing, evaluating, and understanding family well-being. The Hong Kong government has also recognized the importance of fostering family well-being for the betterment of society. A Family Impact Assessment process has been developed to monitor the influence of policies on family responsibility, family stability, family relationship, and family engagement (Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong, 2018). A family perspective and family centered approach have been gradually adopted for Hong Kong's social services (Lau, 2020). However, a comprehensive understanding of the family well-being of Hong Kong people is still lacking, resulting in a shortage of evidence-informed directions for related social policies and services.

Hong Kong is a former British colony and is the most important financial center of China. It is a metropolis with unique characteristics, being a fusion of Eastern and Western cultures and beliefs, and taking a *laissez-faire* approach to social welfare policy while having well-developed social services (Xia & Ma, 2019). It is a world leader in both working hours and life expectancy. In recent years, Hong Kong has seen high competitiveness, large income disparities, and low fertility rates. This is a deeply complex context for individuals and families, with pressing questions such as: How do Hong Kong people appraise their family well-being? What are the influential factors? Are the determinants of family well-being in Hong Kong unique, or similar to those in other countries?

To find the answers, the research team developed a socially relevant and culturally unique measurement of family well-being and used it to assess the family well-being of Hong Kong people. Details of the development process and the construct of the measurement have been reported elsewhere (Wong et al., 2022). This article offers a profile of family well-being in Hong Kong obtained with this measurement, which was developed specifically to reflect the heterogeneous demographic, family structural, and socioeconomic characteristics of Hong Kong people.

## THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION AND HYPOTHESES

### An integrated approach to studying family well-being

Family well-being is a multidimensional concept. It refers to an amalgamation of different types of individual well-being (i.e., physical, social, economic, and psychological) and encompasses the relational dimension of human life and family functioning in general, alongside which social and cultural contexts should be considered (Lindberg et al., 2018; Prime et al., 2020; Wollny et al., 2010). In the current study, family well-being was defined as “the state of family that can perform various functions to satisfy the diverse needs of individual members in the family through interactions with the environment” (Wong et al., 2022). This definition denotes the degree to which individual needs and family functions are fulfilled and the implied criteria by which families are regarded as “well” or “unwell.” Assessments of family well-being involve a combination of both objective and subjective dimensions and may vary across societies due to social, cultural, political, and economic differences (Wollny et al., 2010).

There are four main theoretical approaches to studying family well-being: (1) ecological systems theory, emphasizing the interaction and interdependence of family well-being and environments; (2) resource theory, focusing on interdependent resources in family relationships; (3) family systems theory, viewing family as an organized hierarchy of subsystems with multiple functions; and (4) nontheoretical approaches, such as the family functioning approach, domain-based frameworks, and data-driven and special focus frameworks (Wollny et al., 2010). These approaches are not mutually exclusive; many empirical studies integrate two or more models (Noor et al., 2014; Summers et al., 2005).

The Hong Kong family wellbeing index (HKFWI), an approach that integrates ecological systems theory, resource theory, and the family functioning approach, was adopted in this study (Wong et al., 2022). Deeply influenced by both Chinese culture and Western values, Hong Kong families have been shown to function similarly to families in developed countries: providing care, nurture, and support for members; managing resources; and providing socialization, guidance, and a sense of identity and belonging (Shae & Wong, 2009; Wong et al., 2022). At the same time, traditional Chinese values that emphasize the family's collective interest, close harmonious relationships, and responsibility for members' well-being still prevail among Hong Kong Chinese families (Wong et al., 2019). The HKFWI was constructed on

the basis of these values, with major family functions summarized into six domains: family solidarity, family resources, family health, social resources, social involvement, and work–life balance, with the first three referring to the intra-family situation and the last three to the family's relationships with larger systems (i.e., community and workplace; Wong et al., 2022).

## Family well-being and family structural and socioeconomic characteristics

Family well-being reflects the degree to which the family performs its function of satisfying the diverse needs of its members. What functions need to be performed and how the family performs them are dependent on structural characteristics (e.g., family size, composition, stability, and labor division) and internal and external resources (i.e., formal and informal support), which change over the family life cycle in accordingly historical conditions (Skolnick & Skolnick, 2014; Wong et al., 2019). For example, the size and composition of the family indicate not only the caring burden, but also the amount of potential economic, relational, and emotional resources available. Since family well-being is usually studied from an intra-personal perspective, that is, a single person's subjective appraisal of the well-being of the family as a whole (Krys et al., 2021), individual characteristics such as gender, age, and personality traits may also impact the results (McKeown et al., 2003).

At the macro level, sociologists and social policy scholars have discussed trends in families and in the division of welfare-provision responsibilities among the family, the market, and the state. A major finding is that, in modern societies, the state has been required to assume increasing responsibility for caring for minors and the elderly, as families have grown smaller, more nuclear, less stable, and more likely to have both parents working. Thus, these families are less able to meet the needs of their members (Jones, 2012). At the micro level, empirical studies have revealed how family economic status, family arrangements, and family functioning are influenced by structural characteristics. For example, two-parent families are considerably better off than single-parent families because of the mutual support that couples give each other and the possibility of having two incomes (Thomas & Sawhill, 2005). Some studies have indicated that more conflicts occur in multi-generational families (Chiu & Choi, 2015), while others have pointed out the positive effect of grandparenting, both on the mental health of the grandparents and on the ability of working parents to manage work–life conflicts (Jones, 2012).

In contrast to these inconclusive findings, socioeconomic status has long been held to be a positive predictor of individual well-being. Measures of socioeconomic status such as income, education, and employment have usually been directly included in the calculation of a well-being score (Berger-Schmitt & Jankowitsch, 1999; Sanchez-Sanchez, 2017). Economists have revealed that, up to a certain point, happiness varies directly with income (Layard, 2005). Economic hardship has long been identified as an important risk factor for family well-being because of its negative influence on material living conditions (Saunders et al., 2014) and on family time and rhythms (Zubrick et al., 2000), and thus on family functioning as a whole (Ma et al., 2009).

However, the happiness-income paradox, which holds for both developed and developing countries (Easterlin et al., 2010), pushes us to further examine the precise relationship between *income* and family well-being. As Layard (2005) suggested, people evaluate their wealth not in isolation but in comparison with others. This was echoed by the longitudinal cross-nation comparison conducted by Easterlin (2013) and by Adler and Seligman's (2016) report on the relatedness of life satisfaction and relative (not absolute) income. Considering the subjective dimension of family well-being, the perceived importance of wealth and thus the influence of income on family well-being differ across societies with different characteristics. The meta-analysis by Howell and Howell (2008) revealed that the strength of the correlation between economic status and subjective well-being varies according to a region's level of economic development and is weakest among high-income developing economies and for highly educated populations.

Similar to income, *education* has also been seen as a positive predictor of better individual and/or family well-being because of its positive associations with employment, family income, and richer resources for dealing with daily life. However, studies have also revealed that more education does not necessarily lead to the fulfillment of expectations of a higher family income or to better individual/family well-being, and that people with less education do not necessarily perceive themselves as being less happy (Layard, 2005). In a study of family happiness in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Family Welfare Society, 2018), no significant difference was found according to level of education. Likewise, Ruiu and Ruiu (2019) reported a complex relationship between education and happiness among a highly educated Italian population, with a mismatch between expected and effective incomes negatively affecting perceptions of happiness.

The interaction between *employment* and family well-being is even more complicated. On the one hand, employment generally leads to higher economic status

and to comparatively better mental health and functioning for individuals, regardless of age, sex, or social class (Wood & Burchell, 2018). On the other hand, studies of work–life interference have reported the potential negative influence of employment on individual and family well-being, due to long working hours and job-related stressors (Akhtar et al., 2012).

Another employment-related factor that may influence family well-being is the outsourcing of household tasks, which has become an important strategy to mitigate work–life conflicts and to respond to the increasing participation of women in the labor force (Chan, 2006). The increasing use of domestic helpers among all income groups in Asian societies such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore has been documented. The Census and Statistics Department (2021) reported that 13.4% of households in Hong Kong hired domestic helpers in 2020 to do such tasks as cleaning, cooking, and caring for children and the elderly. Most studies have suggested that the hiring of a domestic helper promotes family well-being as it helps to alleviate work–life conflicts, lessens the caring burden, and generally provides tangible and emotional support (He & Wu, 2019). However, the benefits for family well-being are not definite. Cheung (2014) revealed that hiring domestic help does not substantially improve the marital relationship. Some studies have suggested that it can even complicate family interactions, especially in the case of live-in domestic helpers (Cortés & Pan, 2013).

Because of these different theoretical approaches and definitions of family well-being and potential differences at the social, economic, and cultural levels, findings on the influential factors of family well-being are usually inconclusive and even contradictory. Therefore, the abovementioned evidence—the influence of family demographic and socioeconomic factors on family well-being—provides direction for exploration but does not inform the situation in Hong Kong, a prosperous region but one that has multiple social problems and a complex mix of different cultural values. In this study, the two research questions were: (1) What is the family well-being of people living in the particular environment of Hong Kong? and (2) How does well-being differ according to demographic, family structural, and socioeconomic characteristics?

## Hypothesis

In this study, gender and age were included as the demographic characteristics for testing; family structural characteristics were operationalized into three variables, that is, marital status, family size, and burden of caring for young children (under the age of 13); and

socioeconomic factors included level of education, family income, and economic activity status. Since many Hong Kong families hire domestic helpers, this was included as an independent variable that might impact family well-being.

The following hypotheses were developed with reference to theories and previous empirical findings:

**H1.** Family well-being would exhibit gender and age differences.

**H2.** Family structural characteristics (marital status, family size, and caring burden) would be differentiating factors, with people in intact marriages, with larger families, and with no burden of caring for young children predicted to have higher HKFWI scores.

**H3.** Socioeconomic factors such as level of education, family income, and economic activity status would be positively correlated with family well-being.

**H4.** The hiring of a domestic helper would predict better family well-being.

## METHODS

### Data

The data used in this study were drawn from a region-wide survey carried out by the research team in July and August 2019 to construct and validate an HKFWI for Hong Kong families. It was a cross-sectional random-digit-dialing telephone survey with a dual-frame (i.e., landline and mobile) sampling design (Wong et al., 2022). The target population of this survey was adult Hong Kong residents (aged 18 or above) living with at least one family member and who spoke either Cantonese or Mandarin—the two most common dialects in Hong Kong. The response rate of this survey was 41.0% for the landline survey and 42.4% for the mobile phone survey.

The participants were interviewed using a questionnaire that included the HKFWI and questions about their demographic and socioeconomic circumstances (gender, age, education, family income, and economic activity status) and family structure (marital status, number of family members living together, number of children under the age of 13 under the family's care, and the hiring of a domestic helper). Each interview was conducted using a standardized procedure, and took around 10 min. Informed consent from the participants was obtained at



the beginning of each interview, and the study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the authors' university.

## Participants

A total of 2008 adult respondents were successfully interviewed, of whom 52.5% were women and 47.5% were men. This ratio is comparable to that of Hong Kong's population aged 15 or above in that year (female: 55.2%; male: 44.8%; Census and Statistics Department, 2020b). As summarized in Table 1, the respondents were relatively evenly distributed in terms of age. Each age group comprised around 20% of the sample, with the elderly (aged 60 or above) being the largest group (25.3%). Those with a tertiary education comprised 42.0%, and over half (57.4%) had received only a secondary education or below. The representativeness of the sample is also seen in the similarity of its distribution in terms of age and educational attainment to that of the whole population. As for status of economic activity, 61.8% of the samples were employed, 5.4% were students, and 32.3% were retired people, homemakers, or people seeking employment. Monthly family income was categorized into three groups—low, middle, and high—with US\$2550 and US\$5110 as the cutoff points, matching the definition of the poverty line and median monthly household income in Hong Kong for the year 2019 (Census and Statistics Department, 2020a). Of this sample, a plurality reported a high family income (more than US\$5110) (41.4%). People with a middle family income (between US\$2550 and US\$5110) comprised about one third (30.8%) of the sample, with the low-income group (lower than US\$2550) making up the rest (11.7%).

The family structural characteristics of the sample showed that a major proportion were married or cohabiting people (67.2%), followed by the unmarried (25.9%), and those who were separated, divorced, or widowed (6.2%). The average family size was 3.58, with three-person and four-person families being the most common (33.0% and 29.1%, respectively). The average number of children under the age of 13 in each family was 0.33, with the majority of the respondents living in a family without young children (75.4%). About 16.4% of the sample had a domestic helper at the time of the survey.

## Measures

The HKFWI is a measurement that was developed for this study by the research team. It contains 26 items in six domains: (1) family solidarity, referring to the degree

of cohesiveness (13 items, e.g., “the family enjoys time together” and “family members have trust in each other”); (2) family resources, referring to the availability and optimal utilization of a family's economic and psychological capital (5 items, e.g., “the family has comfortable housing” and “the family has enough income to cover daily expenses”); (3) family health, referring to physical and mental health (2 items, “how is the condition of your and your family's physical health” and “how is the condition of your and your family's mental health”); (4) social resources, referring to the availability and accessibility of formal services for families as offered by the government and/or social services units, and of informal support from social networks (2 items, “the accessibility of formal support and social services” and “the accessibility of help and support from relatives, friends, neighbors”); (5) social involvement, referring to the family's positive connection with the wider environment (two items, “what is the frequency of your family's social involvement” and “what is the frequency of your family's participation in voluntary service or donation”); and (6) work–life balance, referring to the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in and equally satisfied with his or her work role and family role (2 items, “work interferes with family life” and “family issues interfere with work performance”).

Questions of the index were phrased so that answers could be given on an 11-point Likert scale, as with other scales on individual or family well-being (International Wellbeing Group, 2013; Wollny et al., 2010), with higher scores indicating better family well-being. Although responses were given from an intra-personal perspective, survey questions were designed to obtain each respondent's overall appraisal of his/her family's well-being. The HKFWI score was an aggregation of the means of the six domains, with social involvement and work–life balance each weighted as 10% of the total score and the other four domains each weighted as 20%. The index, specifically developed to measure the family well-being of Hong Kong people, is comprehensive and has been validated as having sound psychometric properties, with the index's Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.90$  and that of each of the domains ranging between 0.52 and 0.94 (Wong et al., 2022).

## Statistical analysis

Considering the potential skewness of a sample reached through a telephone survey, we weighted the sample before conducting any statistical analyses, first based on the probability of selection by landline and mobile phones, and then according to up-to-date figures on the

TABLE 1 Profile of the participants.

	Total ( <i>n</i> = 2008)		Working people ( <i>n</i> = 1240)		Nonworking people, excluding students ( <i>n</i> = 648)		Group difference (Chi-square)
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	
Gender							58.306***
Female	1055	52.5 [55.2]	577	46.5	421	64.9	
Male	953	47.5 [44.8]	664	53.5	227	35.1	
Age							717.599***
18–29 [15–29]	370	18.4 [18.0]	241	19.4	21	3.3	
30–39	346	17.2 [17.6]	300	24.2	45	7.0	
40–49	365	18.2 [17.3]	304	24.5	61	9.4	
50–59	419	20.9 [18.5]	304	24.5	108	16.7	
60 or above	507	25.3 [28.6]	91	7.3	412	63.7	
Education							195.736***
Secondary or below	1152	57.4 [66.1]	598	48.2	526	81.2	
Tertiary	844	42.0 [33.9]	642	51.8	119	18.4	
Missing	12	0.6	0	0.0	3	0.4	
Family income (US\$)							202.024***
Low (<2550)	234	11.7	71	5.7	154	23.7	
Middle (2550–5110)	617	30.8	372	30.0	201	31.0	
High (>5110)	832	41.4	643	51.8	151	23.3	
Missing	324	16.1	155	12.5	142	22.0	
Marital status							212.609***
Unmarried	520	25.9	377	30.4	34	5.2	
Married/cohabiting	1350	67.2	825	66.5	521	80.5	
Separated/widowed	125	6.2	35	2.8	89	13.7	
Missing	13	0.6	3	0.3	4	0.6	
Family size							27.949***
2	356	17.7	199	16.0	152	23.4	
3	662	33.0	396	31.9	227	35.0	
4	585	29.1	390	31.5	143	22.1	
5 or more	386	19.2	252	20.3	119	18.4	
Missing	20	1.0	3	0.3	7	1.1	
Children under 13							11.179**
0	1513	75.4	894	72.1	515	79.4	
1	334	16.7	235	18.9	93	14.4	
2 or more	145	7.2	105	8.4	40	6.2	
Missing	15	0.8	7	0.6	0	0.0	
Hiring a domestic helper							1.089
No	1667	83.0	1024	82.5	544	84.1	
Yes	330	16.4	214	17.3	99	15.2	
Missing	11	0.5	3	0.2	5	0.7	

Note: Statistics in [] present the gender, age, and educational distribution of the population of Hong Kong aged 15 or above in mid-2019. Cases containing missing values were excluded from the chi-square test.

\*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001.

age-sex distribution of the whole population (Table 1; Census and Statistics Department, 2020b).

A general linear model was set up with HKFWI and its subscales as the dependent variables, and the cluster of demographic factors (including gender and age), family structural factors (including marital status, family size, caring for young children, and hiring a domestic helper), and socioeconomic factors (including education, family income, economic activity status) as the independent variables. This model was used to test the hypotheses and to examine the heterogeneity of the overall HKFWI and domain-specific scores according to each independent variable. The overall HKFWI score for nonworking people could have been slightly different from that of working people. However, economic activity status was quite indicative of socioeconomic status, making it a reasonable controlling variable. A chi-square analysis showed a significant difference between the two groups in terms of gender, age, education, family income, marital status, family size, and caring for young children (Table 1). Therefore, the same statistical analyses were repeated for both the working and the nonworking samples, to examine factors influencing their family well-being, especially in the domain of work–life balance.

All of the independent variables, with the exception of age and family size, were converted into dummy variables for the regression analysis. Because of the heteroskedasticity of this cross-sectional data, which was identified through the modified Breusch–Pagan test and the White test, the statistical analyses in this study were correctly carried out using heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error estimators (HC3 estimator; Hayes & Cai, 2007). All of the analyses were completed using the computer program SPSS 28.

When taking into consideration all items of the measurement and the independent variables, there was a moderate rate of missing values (“difficult to answer” and “refuse to disclose”), ranging from 0% to 14.7% for each question. The most missing values were recorded for the item “accessibility of formal support and social services,” with 296 of 2008 respondents choosing “difficult to answer” or declining to disclose their view. As for cases with missing values, 25.8% of the sample had one or two missing values, around 10.6% had three or four missing values, and about 2% had five or more missing values. In total, around 38.4% of the samples were with one or more missing values. Since inappropriate treatment of the missing data may cause serious problems, we adopted a widely used and preferred method—multiple imputation—to deal with missing values. Five imputations were conducted to estimate the missing data of all variables used in the analysis.

## RESULTS

The regression analysis revealed that the demographic, family structural, and socioeconomic factors as a whole accounted for 11%–12% of the variance in the overall HKFWI (adjusted  $R^2 = \text{max: } 0.119; \text{min: } 0.111$ ), with almost all factors exerting a significant impact, except economic activity status, family size, and caring for young children. Specifically, females, older people, those with a tertiary education, a family income of US\$2550 or above, and with a domestic helper tended to have higher HKFWI scores. Also, people who were not living with their partners because of separation, divorce, or death reported significantly lower HKFWI scores than did married/cohabiting people ( $b = -0.232, p < 0.05$ ), while unmarried people were found to be not significantly different from separated/widowed or married/cohabiting people (Table 2).

The results further revealed the model's significant predictive power in each aspect of the HKFWI, although the influential factors differed across the six domains (Table 2).

Specifically, significant gender differences were observed only in the social aspects of family well-being, that is, men scored significantly lower than women in social resources ( $b = -0.247, p < 0.05$ ) and social involvement ( $b = -0.731, p < 0.001$ ), but not in other aspects. Older people perceived relatively more family resources ( $b = 0.277, p < 0.001$ ), better family health ( $b = 0.147, p < 0.001$ ), and better work–life balance ( $b = 0.137, p < 0.01$ ).

People with a tertiary education scored significantly higher than their counterparts in the domains of family resources ( $b = 0.392, p < 0.001$ ), social involvement ( $b = 0.653, p < 0.001$ ), and work–life balance ( $b = 0.319, p < 0.01$ ). Only family health, social involvement, and work–life balance were impacted by economic activity status, with working people having better family health ( $b = 0.293, p < 0.001$ ) and significantly poorer social involvement ( $b = -0.385, p < 0.01$ ) and work–life balance ( $b = -0.628, p < 0.001$ ) than the nonworking group. Family income was positively associated with nearly every domain of the HKFWI, and the high-income group scored significantly higher in all domains than the middle-income group. However, the family solidarity and work–life balance of the middle- and high-income groups were not significantly higher or lower than those of the low-income group in these domains.

The impact of marital status on the six domains of the HKFWI was complicated. Among the three groups, the unmarried people had an advantage in family resources (married/cohabiting:  $b = -0.366, p < 0.001$ ; separated/widowed:  $b = -0.686, p < 0.001$ ), the married/cohabiting group scored significantly higher than the

**TABLE 2** General linear model parameter estimates for the overall HKFWI of the whole sample and for each domain (using heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error estimators).

Variables	HKFWI	Family solidarity	Family resources	Family health	Social resources	Social involvement	Work-life balance
Male	-0.125**	-0.071	-0.071	0.050	-0.247*	-0.731***	0.162
Age	0.131***	0.060	0.277***	0.147***	0.057	0.090	0.137**
Tertiary educated	0.221***	0.143	0.392***	-0.034	0.118	0.653***	0.319**
Economically active	-0.031	0.091	0.018	0.293***	-0.048	-0.385**	-0.628***
Family income (low)							
Middle	0.257**	-0.122	0.486**	0.212	0.578**	0.210	0.056
High	0.631***	0.066	1.127***	0.561**	0.942***	0.571**	0.346
High #	[0.373***]	[0.188*]	[0.641***]	[0.349***]	[0.364***]	[0.361**]	[0.290**]
Marital status (unmarried)							
Married/cohabiting	0.102	0.226*	-0.366***	0.194	0.225	0.804***	-0.341*
Separated/widowed	-0.130	-0.099	-0.686***	-0.426*	0.520*	0.164	-0.080
Separated/widowed @	[-0.232*]	[-0.326]	[-0.320]	[-0.620***]	[0.295]	[-0.640**]	[0.260]
Family size	-0.009	-0.117***	-0.064	0.043	-0.021	-0.005	0.233***
Caring for young children	-0.025	0.312***	-0.017	0.043	-0.281*	-0.234	-0.126
Hiring a domestic helper	0.327***	0.273**	0.475***	0.269**	0.356**	0.030	0.496***
Intercept	5.382	7.343	6.063	5.789	4.322	3.292	3.492
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> (max)	0.119	0.039	0.155	0.061	0.049	0.065	0.062
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> (min)	0.111	0.036	0.147	0.052	0.040	0.061	0.055

Note: Statistics in [] present the results of additional analysis. # To examine the potential differences in HKFWI between a higher-income family and a middle-income family, an extra set of regression analyses was conducted with “middle” as the reference value for the variable “family income.” @ To examine the potential difference in HKFWI between separated/widowed people and married/cohabiting people, an extra set of regression analyses was conducted with “married/cohabiting” as the reference value for the variable “marital status.”  $n = 2008$ .

Abbreviation: HKFWI, Hong Kong family wellbeing index.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

other two groups in social involvement (unmarried:  $b = 0.804$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; separated/widowed:  $b = -0.640$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), while the separated/widowed had significantly worse family health than the other two groups (unmarried:  $b = -0.426$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; married/cohabiting:  $b = -0.620$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). As for the other three domains, none of those with any type of marital experience had an advantage or disadvantage. For example, married people or cohabitants had significantly better family solidarity ( $b = 0.226$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) but poorer work-life balance ( $b = -0.341$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) than unmarried people only, while widows/widowers and those who were separated/divorced also had significantly better social resources ( $b = 0.520$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) than unmarried people only.

Family size had a negative association with family solidarity ( $b = -0.117$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but a positive effect on work-life balance ( $b = 0.233$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In contrast, caring for young children had a positive impact on family solidarity ( $b = 0.312$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) but no significant influence on work-life balance. People with young children in the family had a significantly lower perception of the

availability and accessibility of social resources ( $b = -0.281$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) than those without. Finally, hiring a domestic helper had a positive effect on each domain of the HKFWI except for social involvement.

A separate set of regression analyses was conducted to examine influential factors in the family well-being of working people, using the same cluster of independent variables, excluding economic activity status. The results revealed the significant predictive power of the model for the overall family well-being of working people (adjusted  $R^2 = \text{max: } 0.118$ ;  $\text{min: } 0.113$ ) as well as for each of the six domains, with most of the associations between the independent variables and dependent variables consistent with those for the whole sample (Table 3). However, some factors lost their statistically significant impact on the HKFWI of working people. These included the negative effects of widowhood and a broken marriage on family resources, family health, and social involvement; the positive effects of widowhood and a broken marriage on social resources; and the positive effects of hiring a domestic helper on family solidarity and family health.



**TABLE 3** General linear model parameter estimates for the overall HKFWI of working people and for each domain (using heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error estimators).

Variables	HKFWI	Family solidarity	Family resources	Family health	Social resources	Social involvement	Work-life balance
Male	-0.162**	0.028	-0.048	0.012	-0.409***	-0.651***	-0.136
Age	0.132***	0.045	0.243***	0.128**	0.078	0.199*	0.136*
Tertiary educated	0.278***	0.150	0.474***	-0.080	0.193	0.758***	0.551***
Family income (low)							
Middle	0.050	-0.241	0.383*	0.297	0.070	-0.439	-0.083
High	0.439***	-0.089	1.039***	0.619**	0.467	0.221	0.101
High #	[0.390***]	[0.152]	[0.656***]	[0.322**]	[0.397**]	[0.660***]	[0.184]
Marital status (unmarried)							
Married/cohabiting	0.096	0.249*	-0.438***	0.204	0.315*	0.688**	-0.389*
Separated/widowed	0.070	-0.337	-0.339	0.225	0.376	0.556	0.291
Separated/widowed @	[-0.026]	[-0.586**]	[0.098]	[0.021]	[0.061]	[-0.132]	[0.680]
Family size	-0.019	-0.107*	-0.059	0.040	-0.051	-0.079	0.240***
Caring for young children	0.014	0.296**	0.073	0.155	-0.378*	-0.245	0.091
Hiring a domestic helper	0.272***	0.141	0.395***	0.152	0.514**	-0.130	0.443**
Intercept	5.555	7.533	6.212	6.090	4.769	3.306	3.041
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> (max)	0.118	0.035	0.162	0.043	0.059	0.081	0.054
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> (min)	0.113	0.030	0.148	0.038	0.053	0.076	0.050

Note: Statistics in [] present the results of additional analysis. # To examine the potential differences in HKFWI between a higher-income family and a middle-income family, an extra set of regression analyses was conducted with “middle” as the reference value for the variable “family income.” @ To examine the potential difference in HKFWI between separated/widowed people and married/cohabiting people, an extra set of regression analyses was conducted with “married/cohabiting” as the reference value for the variable “marital status.”  $n = 1240$ .

Abbreviation: HKFWI, Hong Kong family wellbeing index.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

For working people, the positive impacts of family income also changed in some domains, including the disappearance of the significant advantage in the family solidarity and work-life balance of the high-income group in comparison with the middle-income group, and the better overall family well-being and social resources of the middle-income group in comparison with the low-income group.

On the other hand, some factors gained predictive power for the working population. For example, the insignificant association between age and social involvement for the whole sample was identified as being significantly positive for the working group ( $b = 0.199$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Marital status also became a differentiating factor in the social resources of working people, with married people or cohabitants having a perception of more social resources than the unmarried group ( $b = 0.315$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This was the first study to comprehensively examine demographic, family structural, and socioeconomic variations in

family well-being among a Hong Kong Chinese population, using a validated measurement and a randomized sample.

The first hypothesis regarding gender and age differences in family well-being was verified: in general, women and older people had a higher appraisal of their family well-being than did men and younger people. The results differed somewhat from those of previous studies, which either did not find gender and age differences (Hong Kong Family Welfare Society, 2018) or found the opposite association between gender and overall well-being (Batz & Tay, 2018). However, in line with previous evidence (Mackenzie et al., 2006; Xia & Ma, 2021), gender was found to have a significant impact on the social domains of the HKFWI, such as social resources and social involvement. The women in the study may have perceived abundance in these domains because they usually have better formal and informal social support and maintain better community connections and involvement than men. The positive association between age and family well-being, which previous studies usually found to be insignificant, persisted in this study regardless of

economic activity. Together with the positive effects on family resources and work–life balance, a possible explanation for these results is that older people generally have accumulated more economic resources, psychological capital, and wisdom in life. They also tend to hold better positions at work and/or have more mature approaches to dealing with difficult family situations such as work–life balance. The mass protests and social turbulence that occurred in Hong Kong during the period when the data were being collected for this study may also have contributed to the abovementioned results. The protesters were overwhelmingly young (around 60% were below 30 years old) and were severely disappointed with the government, leading to sharp conflicts with older family members (Lee et al., 2019).

As for the hypotheses regarding family structural factors, the factors of marital status, family size, and caring for young children were all shown not to be differentiating variables of overall family well-being. Instead of simply supporting or refuting previous studies that suggested that being married had a positive effect on life satisfaction (Mikucka, 2016; Schoon et al., 2005), this study suggested that marital status had a complex impact on overall HKFWI and its different domains. In comparison to being single, being in an intact marriage or cohabiting may not significantly promote overall family well-being, while being separated or widowed has definite negative consequences. As expected, marriage/cohabitation was positively associated with family solidarity and the family's social involvement, while family resources and family health were found to be strongly impacted when a marriage breaks down. However, seemingly contrary to the common idea that marriage increases an individual's economic capacity, the married/cohabiting people in this study experienced significantly more constraints on family resources and more work–life conflicts than did the unmarried people, regardless of the status of their economic activity. A possible explanation for this is the increased investments in money and time involved in maintaining a marriage and family, as getting married signifies the establishment of a separate household and a new stage of life. Married people are urged to leave their parents, buy a home of their own, and fulfill the multiple responsibilities of an independent family unit. Therefore, in comparison to the unmarried, married people might have housing loans to pay off and a bigger family to support, and they might face increased costs and time demands in maintaining wider family relationships (as required by Chinese custom). Another seemingly counter-intuitive result was the better social resources perceived by people who are separated or widowed. This could be explained by the heightened perception of the availability of social support through people's actual use

of such support during difficult periods in their life, such as when parting from their partner because of separation, divorce, or death.

The contradictory effects of family size and caring for young children on family solidarity and work–life balance further complicate the situation. The results suggest that rearing young children significantly promotes family solidarity but has no significant impact on work–life balance, while family size has a negative effect on family solidarity but a positive effect on work–life balance. A possible explanation for this finding is that marriage and rearing young children can strengthen intra-family ties (i.e., marital, intergenerational, and among extended kin) and mutual support among Chinese families, while auxiliary support in the form of childcare or housework from other family members such as grandparents alleviates work–life conflict, especially for working people (Chen et al., 2011; Thein et al., 2007). However, a larger family size can also lead to more complicated family interactions and more responsibilities. This was also partially supported by the negative associations between family size and family solidarity. Such results are consistent with Chan et al.'s (2021) revelation that Hong Kong's high housing expenses and small living spaces not only pose tangible difficulties for family life and sharpen interpersonal conflicts in larger families, but also influence the mental health of individual family members. Further studies are needed to delineate the complicated impacts of family structural factors on family well-being.

The hypothesized differentiating power of education and family income on family well-being was verified by the positive associations of the two variables with the overall and multiple domains of the HKFWI. The influence of education was consistent between the economically active and inactive group, while the threshold for the differentiating power of family income was lifted from a middle level (above US\$2550) for the whole group to a higher level (above US\$5110) for the working group. In addition, family income was found to be a determinant of almost all aspects of family well-being, with the exception of family solidarity and work–life balance, regardless of economic activity. Education was also not a predictive factor of family solidarity. These findings, together with the positive effects of economic activity on family health but negative effects on social involvement and work–life balance, consolidated and enriched the complicated relationship among education, employment, income, and happiness (Ruiu & Ruiu, 2019). Whether this surprising result is unique to Hong Kong Chinese people (because of the greater importance they attach to family relations) has yet to be examined through a more detailed exploration and cross-cultural comparison analysis.

As for the influence of hiring a domestic helper, its positive effects on almost all aspects of family well-being were verified, especially the strong associations with family resources and work–life balance. These findings support the suggestion that work–family conflicts could be mitigated and family well-being could be promoted through outsourcing household chores (Cheung, 2014). They also suggest that the benefits of having a domestic helper extend to the provision of emotional support and psychological meaning (Chong et al., 2014). However, yet to be explored is whether the effects of a domestic helper on the subdomains of family well-being would vary according to family income, although Chan (2006) reported that domestic helpers play complicated roles in families of different income levels.

Theoretically, the results of our study validate not only the multifaceted nature of family well-being, but also the necessity of using a compressive and culturally relevant measurement to study it. Many previous studies have operationalized “family well-being” as satisfaction with the relational aspect of family life (Krys et al., 2021; McKeown et al., 2003) or as the functioning of a family system and its subsystems (Botha & Booyesen, 2014; Prime et al., 2020), or as the combination of individual well-being and the quality of family relationships (Swords et al., 2013). All these are generally equivalent to the domain of “family solidarity” in this study. However, the contradictory effects of the independent variables on FWI and its subdomains revealed in this study may suggest the inappropriateness of simply measuring “family well-being” from the relational aspect of family life. Together with some significant inconsistencies between the determinants of family well-being identified in this study and that of the satisfaction of individuals with family life (the important aspect of *individual* well-being) found in previous studies, this indicates that *family* well-being and *individual* well-being may differ in nature. Although an individual instead of a household approach was adopted, the findings of this study consolidated the concept of “family well-being” as more than the sum of individual well-being and the “interdependent happiness” of family life. Family well-being should be conceptualized and measured as the collective well-being of family being a functional unit and with multiple dimensions (McGregor, 2020).

The insignificant direct effect of individual characteristics such as economic activity status on family well-being found in this study may also reflect the theoretical and methodological inappropriateness of using individual-level characteristics as determinants of family well-being. The unit of analysis of family well-being is the “family,” and respondents with different characteristics may belong to families with similar characteristics.

Therefore, factors related to family structure, such as marital status, family size, and type of family structure, should be more indicative of differences in various domains of family well-being. This is not to suggest that the two sets of variables be segregated but that an integrated approach be taken when studying family well-being, since there exist some interaction effects between individual and family structural characteristics on family well-being. For example, the negative influences of a broken marriage and/or widowhood on family health and social involvement were only found for nonworking people but not for working people.

The complicated impacts of socioeconomic factors such as education, employment, and family income on overall family well-being and its subdomains suggest that it may not be appropriate to use these as direct indicators of family well-being. Still, they are usually considered to have positive linear associations with well-being and thus have been used in some studies to directly calculate well-being (Berger-Schmitt & Jankowitsch, 1999; Sanchez-Sanchez, 2017). Family well-being is complex, with both objective and subjective aspects, which can be affected in only a restricted and conditional way by social and economic factors. This insight gives hope not only to the common people but also to policymakers and social service planners in both developing and developed countries. In other words, there are multiple noneconomic ways of promoting family well-being, that is, formulating and delivering family friendly policies and services that provide direct support for childcare, that alleviate family–work conflict and that enhance family health and functioning.

Therefore, the study sheds light on the well-being of Hong Kong families and generates practical suggestions for the formulation of family policies and the development of social services in promoting family well-being. First, social service investments should target low-income families, people with secondary education (or less), and those who are widowed, separated, or divorced. A more detailed assessment of the needs and difficulties of people with the above characteristics should be conducted to develop appropriate support policies and services to improve their family well-being. Second, the finding that family solidarity has no significant associations with any of the individual demographic or socioeconomic characteristics indicates the nature of family relationship issues as being common to all people. The immunity of family solidarity from socioeconomic factors suggests a new direction for family-related policies and services, namely, the importance of the “relational asset” of family, as suggested by family resilience theory (Walsh, 2002). Social services focusing on the relational aspect of family life would be suitable and effective for promoting the family well-being

of people of various demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Third, family centered policies and programs aimed at promoting the relational aspect of well-being should be designed flexibly. Attention should be given to a gender perspective and to a wide variety of formats to meet the needs of those with different family structures and of different economic statuses, and who are at different stages of the family life cycle. For example, community childcare-support and career-support schemes may be especially helpful for promoting work–life balance for those with young children and elderly people to care for. This could also make it possible for those constrained by childrearing responsibilities to enter the labor force. Fourth, current women-oriented family services and policies with an underlying traditional view of gender roles should be changed to facilitate the increased involvement of men in family life and thus improve their family well-being. Finally, the positive effect from hiring a domestic helper on the HKFWI indicates the strategic importance of attracting immigrants to share the burden of caring. It also highlights the urgent need to support families in dealing with multiple caring burdens, especially families that cannot afford a domestic helper.

Despite the theoretical and empirical contributions that this study makes in shedding light on family well-being and its influential factors, the following limitations should be considered:

- (1) As this was a cross-sectional analysis, it was difficult to make causal inferences, and the data may have been affected by the social movements that were occurring at the time of survey.
- (2) As the participants were contacted through a telephone survey, the sample might have been skewed in some aspects, thus affecting the results, although we did use statistical strategies to mitigate the effect.
- (3) As an individual approach was adopted in collecting information on family well-being, the information reflects only the interviewees' perception of their family well-being. An individual's perception of their family's well-being cannot, theoretically or methodologically, be directly equated to the well-being of a family.
- (4) More detailed analyses are required before conclusions can be drawn on the influence of economic activity on family well-being. People become “economically inactive” for quite different reasons, including full-time study, retirement, unemployment, being a homemaker, or through disease/disability.
- (5) Thus, caution should be exercised when generalizing to other populations, as the results of this study may reflect the cultural uniqueness of the Chinese population in Hong Kong. Longitudinal studies,

comparison studies, and studies with more sophisticated designs should be conducted to track the changing trends of family well-being in Hong Kong and to explore the working mechanism between the influential factors and each domain of family well-being, so as to be able to make more specific suggestions for policymaking and service planning.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are available for checking and the findings are original.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

This study received ethical approval from the institutional review board of The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

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