Saving face: Hierarchical positioning
in family-school relationships in Macao

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the role of face as macro-social discourse in the positioning of Chinese parents in the family-school relationship in Macao. Through semi-structured interviewing, stories were collected from seventeen Chinese volunteer participants to explore how the family perceives its positioning within the community and its relationship to the school in particular. Interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed that parents perceive the child's educational achievement as important for gaining face for the family. Face and face-work in Chinese societies are a complex package of social skills used to protect one's face and the face of others in relational settings. Parents perceive teachers as having a higher position in the social hierarchy and believe their expertise should be respected with regard to their child's development and education. Implications for culturally relevant family-based school counseling are discussed.

Keywords: Face-work, family-school relationship, family systems, interpretative phenomenological analysis, ecological mapping.

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Introduction

Families and family members interconnect and interrelate in many ways. As a functional unit and social network, family members are "tied together through their common biological, legal, cultural and emotional history and their implied future" (McGoldrick, Gerson & Shellenberger, 1999, p. 7). The family also functions within the broader society where it establishes relationship patterns that influence the thoughts, feelings and actions of each family member, individually and collectively (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). With children during their schooling years embedded within both family and school, the child forms a link between the two systems (Garrison & Reynolds, 2006) and adults from both contexts inevitably influence each other through their respective interactions and social positions in society.

A substantial volume of research has accumulated regarding parental involvement in educational settings, covering various domains of related parenting practices (e.g., Davis-Kean, 2005; Englund, Luckner, Whaley & Egeland, 2004; Fan, 2001; Wang, 2008). Research regarding family-school interaction has been concerned mostly with the influence of the family on the school-going child. The focus of this research has been mainly on the child's adaptation in the school environment and the influence of parent-child relationship on the child's psychosocial adjustment, academic achievement and school performance, and problem behavior. School-based family counseling research and literature, on the other hand, propose greater collaboration between all parties involved—family, school and child—in order to contribute to a child's coping, resilience and performance within the school environment (Gerrard, 2008; Carter & Evans, 2008). Nonetheless, there is a dearth of information specifically focusing on the parents' perceptions of education and their views of the family-school relationship (Minke, 2010), particularly for Chinese families in Macao. Questions that beg exploration in this context relate to how the family's position in society and the importance of face work in Chinese societies influence the parent's involvement in the public sphere of parent-school interaction.

In this paper, the researcher explores the positioning of parents in the family-school relationship in Macao focusing on a culturally relevant approach to school-based family counseling. The positioning of parents relates, among other things, to understanding the dynamic of human relationships within a social constructionist (Gergen, 2009) and eco-systemic (Hartman, 1995) approach to relational meaning making. Positioning is a multi-dimensional construct (Leung & Chan, 2003) implying constructive interactions and communication with various systems such as the teachers and the school in general. The assumption is that face (i.e., *Mianzi*) as macro-social discourse in the Chinese culture informs parents' involvement, positioning and relationship with the school and teachers. Furthermore, the researcher assumed that parents, despite sacrificing time and money in order to ensure educational opportunities for their children, would act in ways that preserve face for themselves and others. Thus, it would seem that conflict arises between the parental desire to promote their children's educational opportunities and successes and the need for the family to maintain face.

The concept of "face" in Chinese culture can be equated to the Western notion of reputation. It is a dynamic concept that applies to both personal and social relationships, and in the day-to-day lives of the Chinese underlies the socio-cultural values that position parents and teachers. *Mianzi* (face) and *guanxi* (relationship or social networking) in the Chinese culture comprise a ritual propriety that guides individuals to act appropriately in any given context (Sun, 2008; Yu, 2003). It refers to the respect, pride, and dignity ascribed to or achieved by an individual, and based on external evaluation rather than self-determination. Face work is a complex package of social skills one uses to protect his or her face and the face of others in Chinese relational settings. *Mianzi* in Chinese culture is also used primarily for inclusion of others and the creation of a collective identity (Sun, 2008; Yabuuchi, 2004).

Although concerns for face and face work are not unique to Chinese people—Westerners use face saving strategies to protect themselves (the individual) from humiliating, social embarrassment—they are particularly different from the western interpretation (Bond, 1991; Yabuuchi, 2004). For the most part, it is the intention and function of face-work that poses a difference between Asian and Western cultures. Chinese people tend to use face-saving

strategies concomitantly to preserve and maintain strong social relationships. In the parent-school context, the importance of face contributes to a seemingly sharp differentiation or boundary between home and school (Price-Mitchell, 2009). Both face and the separation of functions (i.e., teachers responsible for school learning and parents responsible for home learning) could influence parents' positioning in relation to the school and their reluctance to initiate communication with the teachers about their children and construct a workable family-school partnership.

Method
In this phenomenological study, the researcher used a non-probability purposive sampling strategy (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007), ecological mapping (Hartman, 1995) and semi-structured interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to collect family stories about the educational environment in Macao. Ecological mapping provides a graphical representation of the various systems within which the family is embedded at a given moment in time. This includes, in the macro system, the cultural and ideological system that influences a variety of everyday practices such as values, parenting, relationships, social networking and so on. Family narratives, on the other hand, provide insight into individual and collective experiences in interaction with different systems (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Murray, 2000). A qualitative approach was considered useful as it highlights the strengths and vulnerabilities of a family's ability to connect with those around them.

The researcher enlisted the cooperation of third-year psychology students at a local university as fieldworkers. These students were familiar with the local community and solicited the cooperation of 17 parents through their respective social networks. Volunteering parents—12 mothers with a mean age of 46.8 years and 5 fathers with a mean age of 47.0 years—were all of Chinese ethnicity and had lived in Macao for at least five years at the time of the project. All participating parents had at least one school-going child in either primary or secondary school.

The ecological maps and narratives were collected using two semi-structured interviews of 30-40 minutes each. During the first interview, participants in collaboration with the interviewer completed a brief demographic questionnaire indicating, *inter alia*, age, gender, family size, family income and education levels. Information obtained in the questionnaire and through the interview was used to construct an ecological map indicating the network of relationships within the family as well as with various other systems in the community (Van Schalkwyk, under review). The second interview focused on collecting family stories with the central question: *How do you perceive the family's relationship within the community and in relation to the school in Macao?* Additional probes were used to ensure rich descriptions of parents' perceptions regarding their positioning and the importance of face work, particularly in relation to the schools their children were attending.

Fieldworkers spoke the local language (Cantonese), which is the native language of participants, and interviews were conducted in the participants' homes. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) pose that conversing in one's native language when conducting narrative inquiry is preferred as the participant can feel more comfortable and engage more actively with an interviewer from a similar ethnic group and culture. Sharing family stories is a sacred event and one should always regard these with the greatest respect. Thus, prior to participating each parent

received an information leaflet explaining the purpose of the project as well as issues of anonymity for the family and next of kin. Written consent was also required from all participants, which allowed fieldworkers to record the interview and use collected information for research purposes. Throughout the interviews and in the analysis, the fieldworkers showed respect for their elders and for the family stories they elicited (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The student fieldworkers also transcribed and translated the conversations they audio-recorded into English thereby generating the field texts used in the analysis. The translations were checked and crosschecked by an independent third party to ensure accuracy and credibility. It is difficult to translate the full meanings of many Chinese words into English. Haiman (2005) notes, for example, that working with translated texts has the limitation that some language features and intrinsic nuances and meanings of language are lost in translation. Nonetheless, the English transcripts together with the audio-recordings provided rich data for analysis, particularly since the student fieldworkers collaborated in the analysis and could refer to the original language when necessary.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011) was employed in order to understand the personal and social experiences of parents regarding their experiences in interaction with the school. People are self-interpreting beings who continuously interpret activities in order to make sense of their experiences and actions. In collaboration with the student fieldworkers and applying inductive, idiographic, data-drive and dynamic processes, the researcher gained an in-depth understanding of the meanings and lived world of participating parents' experiences in interaction with the schools their children attended. Thus, through exploring examples from parents' accounts of their interactions (or not) with the school system in Macao, the researcher will show how personal, interpersonal and ideological experiences are interpreted in the context of family-school relationships.

Following an iterative and inductive approach (Larkin et al., 2011), an initial analysis of the 17 field texts was conducted adding unfocused field notes reflecting initial thoughts regarding the research question. After reviewing the field notes, themes within each individual case were identified that related to the personal, interpersonal and ideological levels of narrative described by Murray (2000). This allowed the researcher to interpret the themes within the local context, and build a credible argument in order to propose culturally relevant school-based family counseling. Adopting a critical reflective position enabled the collaborators to check and re-check the original case materials and literature throughout the process of analysis (Watt, 2007). Cognizance of the existing literature on systems theory (Price-Mitchell, 2009), Chinese psychology (e.g., Sun, 2008) and school-based family counseling (e.g., Gerrard, 2008; Minke, 2010) allowed for verification of interpretations regarding the positioning of the family and the role of face work in the dynamic relationship between family and school.

Findings and Discussion
Following the interpretative phenomenological approach, the researcher opted to present the findings and discussion in an integrated fashion. In this regard, extracts from the stories of the interviewed families are presented in Table 1 according to three levels of narratives (Murray, 2000). The personal level of narrative describes how parents organize their perceptions of education and their expectations for their children's schooling. The interpersonal level of

narrative represents parents' accounts of their positioning in relation to the school, while the ideological level of narratives provides insight into how the Chinese concept of face informs the relationship between parents and the school. In the discussion following the extracts from the parents' stories (findings), the underlying meanings are elicited to build a valid and comprehensive argument and in response to the central question of how families position themselves in relation to the educational system in Macao.

Personal level	*"...we wish to educate them to become a useful person because all the children are the future masters of the society."* *"I can only say that the world has changed and the child needs to have a proper concept of it. If they do not study, how can they survive?"* *"Academic performance is also very important...I want his scores to reach a certain level that is considered as good."* *"I hope the teacher can always make interaction with the parents. This situation needs to be improved."* *"...the school contacts me only when the child is naughty or the grades were not good."* *"...because the H1N1... the teacher called us every day, asked for her temperature."*
Interpersonal level	[The Parent Day scheduled] *"by the school for the distribution of report cards and teacher-parent interaction"* *"Because I need to work, I have no time to pick her up after school; therefore, I don't know how the teacher looks like, and talk about her school."* *"I thought that... the reason I really can't speak out... if I told her* [the teacher] *it would affect my daughter. Since she has to continue study in this school and if the teachers dislike her... the teacher always labels her students and says that this student is bad... then she* [my daughter] *will always be bad."*
Ideological level	*"... [my daughter] has to understand that this world is very realistic. If the school has a bad impression of her, it could lead to grade decline... she just has to adapt to them. Overall, if the teacher does not pose unreasonable demands, or is not overly strict, I will tell my daughter to try to bear it."* *"Since the time is limited in the meeting, and there are so many parents waiting for the meeting, there is no chance to talk about problems... and even though I talk to the teacher, he/she may not listen carefully since he/she has another important things to deal with."* *"It is not possible to influence the decisions of teachers. If we told them to change, then my child may suffer, because you do not know whether the teacher is good or bad... if he/she is bad, your child may suffer ... as I know from other parents that their child suffers because they gave some suggestions to the teacher..."*

Table 1   Summary of narratives according to three levels of narrative

Participants in this study had different educational backgrounds. Three participants had completed a Bachelor degree while other participants completed only primary school (2), junior secondary school (5), and senior secondary school (4). Three adults did not provide this information. Most families were dual income families with both parents working full-time in the casino and/or related service industries (e.g., public transport system, hospitality, retail) or for the government. For the most part, the seventeen participating families had a joint monthly income between MOP14,000 and MOP19,999, which is roughly equivalent to the median for Macao of MOP9,000 per single employed person (DSEC, 2009). Nonetheless, these parents perceive themselves as being of lower socio-economic status in society, particularly when taking into account their relatively low education levels. Most of the parents who participated in this study worked in the casino and hospitality industry. Casinos in Macao operate for twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week, and workers have irregular work schedules, which poses a constraint on the degree of involvement parents can have in school-organized activities both in the private (at home) and public (at school) spheres (DSEJ, 2009; Eadington & Siu, 2007; Van Schalkwyk, 2010).

Personal level of narratives

At the personal level of narratives, the focus is on parents' perceptions of the importance of education. Despite having lower education levels (Davis-Kean, 2005), parents in Macao regard the education of their children as very important. The master theme in this regard revolves around the cultural and societal value among Chinese people regarding the importance of effort and education (Fan, 2001; Sun, 2008; Tam & Chan, 2009). Parents perceive the school and the education of their children as important for the development of the child holistically, and for the instillation of good societal values. They also perceive their role as that of a sounding board and encourage open communication with the child. They will not interfere or take up the child's concerns or discontent with a particular teacher. Rather, they try to avoid jeopardizing the child's school life by resolving teacher-child conflict on behalf of the child or by expressing their views to the school in any way or form.

However, with regard to the home-school relationship, the interviewed parents expect the school (or teacher) to communicate with them should there be a concern about the child's performance in school. This is an expectation not fully realized in the local context. Teachers rarely contact the parents. They only contact the parents when there is a need to protect other students' health.

As an important link between family and society, children are expected to live up to the expectations of the family by performing well. Good performance directly reflects on the family and the ability of parents to provide good education at home, and garners esteem not only for the child but also for the family. Ho (2003, p. 67) claims that it is "the high expectation of their children's achievement by Asian parents that induces students' outstanding academic achievement." In Macao, as in most Asian societies (Tam & Chan, 2009), home-based parental involvement, especially learning support, is also more popular than school-based involvement. Mothers in particular spend time supervising homework and providing instrumental support in terms of rewards, private tutors, choosing the 'right' school and providing additional financial resources to encourage the educational attainment of their children.

Interpersonal level of narratives

At the interpersonal level of narratives, parents represent their relationship with the educational system as both satisfactory and dissatisfactory. Parents who participated in the present study have limited interaction and/or involvement with the schools their children attend. For the most part, they attend the Parent Day meeting while the child is still in primary school. When the child reaches secondary school, these visits become less frequent and parent-school interaction declines. For the most part, the parents we interviewed perceive the lack of teacher-parent interaction as stemming from the lack of time and opportunity to engage fully in school-organized activities (Van Schalkwyk, under review). They consider teachers as knowledgeable and they particularly want more opportunities to communicate with them regarding the child's conduct and performance. However, they feel that the teachers are too busy with other things or having to deal with too many students so that they cannot pay attention to the parents' concerns regarding their child. They also perceive their concerns as trifling and negligible, or the school as insufficiently open for them to communicate and express their viewpoints freely.

Thus, as with Asian parents elsewhere (Cheng, 1997; Ho, 2003; Wang, 2008), the interviewed parents do not participate or intervene in the school environment and teaching. Misconceptions and mistrust between parents and school widen the gap and strain the relationship between parents and the educational system (Van Schalkwyk, under review). Teachers are perceived as experts rather than equals, thus creating a hierarchical positioning (Ho, 2003; Wang, 2008). Furthermore, despite efforts from the Education and Youth Bureau of Macao to promote greater family-school partnerships through subsidized programs at the schools, only about 10% of Macao parents participated in one or more workshops and seminars related to parent education in 2008 (DSEJ, 2009). Beliefs or expectations about the child's educational attainment do not encourage parent-school interaction. Rather, parents position themselves at a distance and avoid being a distraction from the work of teachers.

Ideological level of narrative

The central question in this paper concerns the ideological level of narrative, and the ways in which the broader context and face work influence the positioning of the family in relation to the school. At the positional and ideological level of narratives (Murray, 2000), the key issue is the Chinese concept of 'face' or *mianzi* (Bond, 1991; Chan, n.d.; Sun, 2008). Both horizontal and vertical face work emerges in the parent-school relationship. Horizontal face work means someone has a good reputation in front of one's peers and is considered generally dependable, reliable and trustworthy. In this regard, parents may not want to "lose face" in front of their peers (other parents) by approaching the teacher in a public forum such as the Parent Day and by admitting a mistake or, in the case of the school context, that one's child has done something wrong. Losing face is an experience no-one wishes to befall them. Thus, even if the child—and by implication the parents—is clearly "wrong", some parents will go to great lengths to avoid the appearance of losing face.

The interviewed parents in the current study have concerns for maintaining or saving face, which seems to exert great influence on how they perceive their relationship with the school. They are particularly concerned that talking to the teacher about their child's discontent or wrong-doing might have negative or punitive consequences for the child in the school context.

On one hand they perceive teachers as authoritarian and punitive rather than as part of a team who will assist in their child's educational achievements. On the other hand, it seems that parents fear stigmatization or 'losing face' when it should become known that their child is misbehaving in school or not performing up to standard. Rather, they try to 'save face' so as not to be seen as 'bad' or 'ineffective' parents, who do not know how to educate their child or having made a 'mistake' in their parenting.

Making or admitting to a mistake in public is a very humiliating experience and Chinese people will do whatever they can to avoid looking bad in public (Sun, 2008; Yabuuchi, 2004; Yu, 2003). This also applies to parents in this study and their relationship to the school and the fear of looking 'bad' in front of the teachers, which constitutes vertical face work. Vertical or hierarchical face work aims to maintain a good reputation in front of those with higher status (the teachers). Thus, in the parent-teacher relationship a vertical power situation emerges with the teachers in a more esteemed and powerful position than the parent. Similar to what Ho (2003) indicated, Chinese parents view the management and leadership in school affairs as the task of the teachers in which they should not interfere.

Parents in this study perceive a difference between themselves and the teachers, further reinforcing the vertical or hierarchical positioning and lack of involvement of parents in school-organized activities. There is seemingly a clear distinction between the teacher's domain and the parents' domain. Furthermore, in the social encounter between teacher and parent there is also an expectation about the exchange of resources. That is, someone with more social status, power or influence is highly revered (Leung & Chan, 2003), and should take the initiative in sharing information (resources) with those of lower social status. This uneven distribution of power places individuals in different positions on a social hierarchy—i.e., those with education such as teachers are higher up on the social ladder than parents who have limited education (Bond, 1991; Sun, 2008; Yabuuchi, 2004).

The nature of the face-saving and face-giving strategies in Macao will vary considerably based on one's particular constructed role within the social network. The vertical nature of parent-teacher relationships emerges from the parents' own experience of the education system in the past, their educational attainment in earlier years, and a perpetuation of a perceived hierarchical relationship with the teacher as the higher authority (Sun, 2008; Van Schalkwyk, 2010). Contrary to parents in some other cultures, the Chinese parents in this study seem unable to challenge the authority of the school due to the complex nature of face and face work. Despite being interested in more information about their child in the school context (i.e., wanting to know both good and bad things about the child) and having high aspirations for their children's success, parents are reluctant to address these issues in a public forum such as the Parent Day. Addressing these issues may be considered a significant loss of face if it involves the view that the teacher is poor, or that the child is poorly educated or worthy of someone better.

Culturally relevant school-based family counseling
School-based family counselors could benefit from a greater understanding of the socio-cultural values that underlie home-school partnerships, particularly those in Chinese populations. Following a culturally relevant approach, counselors should adopt sensitivity to the conceptualization of self and others, and to social relations when engaging with parents and

children in the school context. The school counselor is often the one who has to deal with parents, either to address family issues related to the child's problem or to smooth things over for the teachers. With the relationship between teachers and parents somewhat strained, parents may not listen to teachers calmly when there is something wrong with their child. However, when communicating with the counselor, usually in a private setting and without public exposure, parents accept things with greater ease (Van Schalkwyk & Sit, in review).

With both horizontal and vertical/hierarchical face-work prevalent in Chinese societies, there is need for a mediator, and the school-based family counselor could serve as a bridge between parents and teachers, fostering workable home-school partnerships. For this, the school counselor needs to develop a dynamic working style and adapt to cultural heritage, particularly with regard to face and face work evident within the local context. Culturally relevant training and sensitivity to the local ideology, as well as embracing family counseling (Gerrard, 2008), are important when engaging the family in a home-school partnership and when helping teachers develop productive family-school collaboration (Minke, 2010). School counselors should also develop their relationship with parents carefully, in order to overcome perceived inequities, and help lend face to families in their interaction with the school.

Limitations

The present project had some limitations. The interviewers (students in training) were emerging adults and still in the process of acquiring the skills of interviewing and eliciting rich texts for qualitative research. They were also faced with power-hierarchical, face-saving non-disclosure and ambiguous communication from the Chinese parents they interviewed, which made it difficult for the young interviewers to elicit more information from participants. Parents could even lie about the true nature of their relationship with the school and the teachers in order not to lose face. Another limitation relates to the translation of the interview texts into English. Despite efforts to ensure accurate and credible translations, some of the finer nuances of the Chinese language were lost in translation (Haiman, 2005) because many words in Chinese are difficult to translate in their full meaning in English. Nonetheless, because the interviewers were native Chinese themselves, spoke the native language of participants, and participated in the translation and analysis or the field texts, the narratives provided rich texts to explore the concepts discussed above.

Conclusion

This paper provides some insight into the macro-social discourse of face that underlies family-school relationships in Macao. Parents in this study adhere to Chinese culture, and are particularly aware of their actions, attitudes and positioning. This results in deliberately ambiguous communication in order to preserve the relationship. Criticizing teachers, or even asking them for more information about one's child, could be considered an insult to the dignity of the teacher in the eyes of his or her peers (Chan, n.d.). Thus, parents in this shame-inducing culture feel apprehensive when discussing issues that might make them or the teacher seem inadequate or inefficient. This cultural macro-discourse informs the positioning of parents and teachers, and poses a major obstacle to a better parent-school relationship and greater parental involvement in the schooling of their children.

Apart from the face-saving theme that constrains parent-teacher interaction, Van Schalkwyk (in review) also identified other barriers and obstacles to creating a workable family-school partnership in Macao. Further research is necessary to explore the perceptions of teachers and school administrators, and to determine ways in which positive and workable parent-school relationships can be developed. This will be particularly relevant for school psychologists and school-based family counselors who wish to engage parents to a greater extent in the schooling of their children. Further research regarding home-school partnerships in Macao and the personal and behavioral barriers is necessary. In particular, there is a great need for specific strategies to engage parents in a constructive family-school relationship that will benefit the child, and motivate children to gain optimally from the education system. Parents value education and expect the school to contribute to the child's all-round development in the fullest sense. They themselves, however, do also need to engage more fully in the process.

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