

SOCIAL COHESION AND THE HONG KONG FAMILY

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Introduction: Social Cohesion and Family Solidarity

The concept of social cohesion refers to a condition of social unity or solidarity, where the parts fit together to form a united whole. On the other hand, in the sociological literature, the family has traditionally and commonly been seen as the fundamental unit in society. One of the most widely used textbooks in introductory sociology begins its discussion of the family with the statement: ‘The family has often been regarded as the cornerstone of society. In pre-modern and modern societies alike it has been seen as the most basic unit of social organization ...’ (Haralambos and Holborn 2000: 503). From this, one can infer the important role of the family in social cohesion. We can reasonably expect the cohesiveness and stability of a society to depend heavily on the unity and strength of its most basic unit, its *cornerstone* the family. This is arguably why governments and non-governmental organizations in different parts of the world, including those in our own society, attach such great importance to *strengthening the family as a social unit*. In recent decades, this *strengthening* has been considered to be even more necessary and urgent in view of the increasingly divergent and often conflicting values and practices that characterize life within the family (Dennis 1993a, 1993b; Etzioni 1995; Chow 1996; Hong Kong Council of Social Service 2001)

We can see an interesting parallel between this concern for family solidarity, or to put it in the language of this conference, for family *cohesion* and the recent mounting interest in social *cohesion*. Chan et al. (2003) launch their discussion of the concept of social cohesion with the observation: ‘Among both the academics and the policymakers, “social cohesion” is a term that enjoys ever-increasing popularity’. The examples they then cite bear testimony to this observation. The authors then point out that diversity and cleavages arising from a host of emerging social conditions such as multiculturalism, social inequality, economic deprivation, and social exclusion have signaled to various governments the need to foster and strengthen social cohesion. Diversity of course is not in itself a problem. Rather it is the problems associated with diversity such as inequality, exclusion and intolerance that are viewed to be in need of solving through building a cohesive community. ‘Diversity and its discontents’, if we may say so, is at the heart of the concern for social cohesion as it is for family cohesion. There is, as we observed above, an apparent parallel between the two concerns. We are going to argue in this paper that in Hong Kong, much of the concern for family cohesion or, to put it in more familiar language, much of the effort to strengthen the family as a social unit, has been pursued on the basis of certain values and goals. From this, we will argue that *social cohesion* research as policy research ought to be premised on a policy-oriented conception of

social cohesion. This conception, and the research that builds on it, should clarify not only *what is social cohesion* but also the *objectives of social cohesion*. In other words, we differ from Chan et al's position as stated in their paper (Chan et al 2003) on developing a definition of social cohesion for policy research. There they advocate a definition of social cohesion that excludes values and objectives.

Family Solidarity and Family Breakdown

We may begin our discussion of family solidarity by observing that people see a need to promote and strengthen family solidarity often because they are worried about family breakdown. We can identify three inter-related notions of family breakdown in the pertinent literature (Popenoe 1988, 1996; Davis and Grossbard-Shechtman 1985; Ng 1989). First there is the notion of *structural breakdown* such as the change in family form from the nuclear family increasingly to the single parent family, the lone family, and the step family. Then there is the notion of a *breakdown in familial relations*. The argument here is that the modern family is increasingly afflicted by discord and conflict between family members - between the husband and wife as well as between parents and children. Finally, we can also discern the notion of an *ideational breakdown*, which mainly refers to the decline of traditional familial values such as filial piety, loyalty to the family and to family members. Family breakdown is in turn believed to lead to increase in crime, juvenile delinquency, suicide, drug addiction and a host of other social problems.

But the idea of family breakdown assumes that there is some form or type of family which is well worth preserving or strengthening, some form of family which is ideal or close to the ideal, and that family breakdown is the breakdown of this *ideal or model family*. What then is this model family? Is it really worth preserving and strengthening? Has such an ideal family ever existed? We can raise such questions with regard to claims of 'the family in crisis' and 'family breakdown' in Hong Kong. We see these as basic and necessary questions in any study of family solidarity and family breakdown. In other words, we do not find it meaningful or useful to talk about promoting family solidarity or averting family breakdown without first considering what kind of family (and familial relationships) we are upholding or wish to uphold. Values (and ideologies) are inevitably involved in studies and discussions of family solidarity and family breakdown, as in other social science studies and discussions. We will now look at what values and ideologies underlie discussions and policies relating to the family and family solidarity in Hong Kong.

The Government's Policies relating to the Family

In Hong Kong, as in most other modern societies, the government has been prone to viewing the family as the bulwark of social cohesion and social stability, with the corollary that the family has to be strengthened to prevent or reduce the spread of social ills. In the 1960s, this strengthening took the form of 'help(ing) families to remain intact as strong natural units and to care for (and not to abandon) their children and

handicapped or aged members'(Hong Kong Government 1965:10). Services were provided for families and individuals (such as the infirm and aged) in need of help, but the Government emphasized that such services 'should not be organized in such a way as to ... accelerate the *breakdown* of the *natural* or *traditional* sense of responsibility ...' (Hong Kong Government 1965: 5; our emphasis). The Government's position remained broadly the same through the 1970s, when in 1973 the White Paper on Social Welfare reaffirmed its commitment to provide 'comprehensive services to families in need' (Hong Kong Government 1973: 9), and in 1979, the White Paper introduced *family life education* programmes 'to preserve and strengthen the family as a unit' (Hong Kong Government 1979: 19). It is in 1991 that the Government, perhaps belatedly, admitted the emergence of 'new needs and problems ... which will require greater efforts in the context of future provision of family and child care services' (Hong Kong Government 1991: 20). The 1991 White Paper indeed reiterated and reaffirmed the Government's basic stance with respect to the family over the preceding three decades. Thus it stated once again that the provision of social welfare should not detract individuals from 'meeting their commitments to family and society'(Hong Kong Government 1991:16); 'emphasis will continue to be placed on the importance of the family unit as the primary provider of care and welfare, and thus on the need to preserve and support it' (Hong Kong Government 1991:16). The Government's latest statement on family welfare follows the same principle: '... the overall objectives of family welfare services are to preserve and strengthen the family as a unit and to develop caring inter-personal relationship ... and to provide for the needs which cannot be met from within the family' (Hong Kong Government 1998: 25).

It seems that the idea of 'family breakdown' is only implicit in the Government's White Papers. What is more obvious is the Government's assumption that some kind of existing family was good for its members and for Hong Kong society, and therefore should be *preserved and strengthened*. This *family*, it appears from the Government's statements, is one that fulfills its role as 'primary provider of care and welfare'. Critics in other countries have attacked their governments for taking the nuclear family as the model family which should be supported and strengthened (Allan 1985; Abbott and Wallace 1992; Silva and Smart 1999). We will examine later whether there is any evidence in the Hong Kong Government's policies to suggest that it is biased in favour of the so-called *conventional (nuclear) family* and against departures (such as single-parent families, lone families, step families etc.) from this model. For the time being we will just observe that the Government has stated (indirectly and implicitly) its criterion of the *good* family in rather general terms – 'the primary provider of care and welfare'. But *how* this family performs or fulfills its 'care and welfare' role does not seem to have been the Government's concern. Rather the Government's main concern seems to be what it sees as a drift towards familial conditions and family types that reduce the family's capacity to fulfill its *responsibility of providing care and welfare*. Here we see the Government's most fundamental and persistent position with regard to the family. The family should, and should be encouraged to, look after the needs of its members. The individual's responsibility towards the family and family members is in the view of the Government a *natural* and *traditional* responsibility (Hong Kong Government 1965: 5) which should be preserved and strengthened. In this light, strengthening the family as a unit is very much

tantamount to enhancing its *natural* capacity to perform its care and welfare function, and so cutting down the Government's family welfare burden. There seems to be a strong pragmatic consideration in the Government's advocacy for family solidarity. This is one important basis for understanding the Government's thinking, as well as its likes and dislikes, about the family.

The Hong Kong Government's Family-related Policies: Critical Comments and Recommendations from the Hong Kong Council of Social Service

But in promoting family solidarity, the Government lacks a comprehensive and coherent policy, with the outcome that social policies often obstruct rather than facilitate families in fulfilling their *natural* responsibilities. This is the message from the Hong Kong Council of Social Service as conveyed in its report on 'family solidarity' (HKCSS 2001). We turn now to the Council's report, not only to see how Government policies have contradicted its 'family objective', but also to take note of the Council's position regarding the family and family solidarity. This will prepare us for a discussion on the one hand of why the Government has been so inadequate in promoting family solidarity, and on the other of what the Council views as the prime objectives of family solidarity. Through such discussions, we hope to be able to draw some lessons from the discourses and studies on the family and family solidarity to bear on the study of social cohesion. We proceed now with the research which the Polytechnic University (HKCSS 2001, chapter 3) did on behalf of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service to gauge the public's views on the bearing of the Government's social policies on the family.

The social policies in question were classified broadly into economic policy, labour policy, educational policy, and medical policy. The research findings show that the overwhelming majority of the respondents (74% in the case of medical policy; 84% and higher for the other policies) believed these policies to have an influence on the family. But more importantly a significant percentage of the respondents (77% for economic policy; 80% for labour policy; 66% for educational policy; and 48% for medical policy) viewed the influence to be negative. The Council of Social Service (2001) followed up with a critical commentary on the impact of the Government's social policies on the family.

Public Housing Policy: In the Council's view, many aspects of the Government's public housing policy have deleterious effects on the family. For instance, grown-up children who are not originally registered as part of their parents' household are not allowed to live with their parents as public housing tenants. This deprives these families of an important source of within-family care for the elderly. The small size of public housing units, in the Council's opinion, is conducive to conflicts among family members, and this, together with the lack of recreational facilities in public housing estates, fosters among the younger generation the attitude of seeking entertainment elsewhere than close to home. In addition, many of the public housing estates are located in new towns where the residents often have to travel a long way to their places of work downtown. This

substantially detracts from the time which public housing tenants can otherwise fruitfully spend with family members.

Educational Policy: The Council sees the current highly competitive examination-oriented educational system as generating great pressure on both children and their parents and hence a source of friction between family members.

Labour Policy: The Council recommends the introduction of paternity leave so that the father can share with the mother the duty of caring for the new-born baby. The Council also regrets the long working hours and the drop in pay which Hong Kong workers have to put up with in recent years, and which inevitably impact negatively on family life. The Council proposes that the Government's labour policy should aim at providing a *family-friendly* working environment for employees.

Cultural Recreational Policy: The Council regrets the paucity of government-sponsored cultural and recreational activities, especially those which target at family participation. This has undesirable consequences. Children often spend their leisure in dubious pursuits in shopping malls, playgrounds and rave parties, adding further to the distance, misunderstanding and conflict between parents and their children.

Social Welfare Policy: The various welfare policies, the Council points out, target at categories of people (such as children, youth, elderly, and disabled) rather than the family as a unit. This approach is unrealistic and ineffective because it tends to serve the individual without taking into adequate account the policy's bearing on family members and the family members' responses and reactions. The Council cites as an example the case of elderly people choosing to live alone away from their family members in order to qualify for the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme.

In short, the Council of Social Service is saying that in many ways, the Hong Kong Government's social policies inadvertently weaken rather than strengthen family solidarity and because of this, make it difficult for the family to perform its 'care and welfare' role. The Council attributes this to the lack of a family policy or family-centred policy in Hong Kong. The Council's position is clear: Social policies must first and foremost aim at strengthening the family as a social unit and empowering the family to perform its functions for its members and for society. The Council's view can perhaps be stated as follows: What is good for the family is also good for the individual and society; therefore the family must have top priority in the Government's policies; the Government needs to be family-centred or family-oriented in policy-making.

The Hong Kong Family in Crisis: The HKCSS's analysis

There is an urgency in the Council's plea, for it sees the modern Hong Kong family as facing a crisis (Council of Social Service 2001, chap. 2). In addressing this crisis, the Council resorts to the notions of *family breakdown* and *weakening of the functions of the family*. The crisis faced by the Hong Kong family, in the Council's view, is in many ways

deeper than that faced by other modern societies. The Council attributes this to Hong Kong's economic downturn since 1997 which aggravates problems already confronting the family, to emigration, to cross-border employment and cross-border marriage, and to new arrivals especially children and the accompanying problem of childcare. In other words, in addition to problems encountered by the family in other modern societies, the Hong Kong family has to cope with difficulties generated within its peculiar socio-geographic environment.

There are other social indicators and phenomena which the Council considers to be evidence of the increasingly grave challenge confronting the Hong Kong family. Examples include (a) the increasing prevalence of the nuclear family, with the concomitant weakening of inter-generational relationships and care; (b) the rising rate of divorce and the corresponding increase in single-parent families; (c) the increasing proportion of married women with paid employment, contributing on the one hand to women's *double burden*, and on the other problems relating to childcare; (d) the heavy pressure which children face from school, and the lack of communication between parents and children, both of which make childhood an unhappy life experience for many children in Hong Kong; (e) the rapidly rising proportion of elderly people and the corresponding challenge of caring for the elderly; and (f) the rising rates of family violence and abuses within the family, and the rising rates of suicides among the elderly and housewives.

In the light of the Council's commentary on the bearing of the Government's social policies on the family, it seems that the Government is not only doing little to cope with the crisis faced by the family, but also unwittingly promoting social conditions and familial relationships that deepen the crisis. It is for this reason that the Council urges the Government to adopt a family-centred strategy in policy-making and proposes a comprehensive family policy for the Government's consideration. From this proposed policy we will later tease out the Council's views on the family as well as the Council's reasons for promoting family solidarity. We turn now to look at some other views on the Hong Kong family and family-related social policies.

The Hong Kong Family and Women's Welfare

From the book *Women and Hong Kong's Welfare Policy* published by the Hong Kong Association for the Advancement of Feminism (1990), we see a critique of welfare policy, and for our purpose, family-related welfare policy, from a perspective that takes into careful account the welfare of women. The AAF begins with the Government's guiding principle in social welfare provision: The Government will intervene to help when and only when the family cannot adequately discharge its welfare responsibilities towards its members. In other words, the Government expects the family to shoulder the bulk of the 'care and welfare' responsibilities for its members. But the *family* in the Government's view, the AAF points out, is one where the husband is the breadwinner while the wife is the housekeeper and financially dependent on the husband. It is this *model family* which the Government has been striving to preserve and strengthen and which constitutes the basis of the Government's welfare arrangements and provisions (AAF 1990, pp. 11-12).

But in doing so, the AAF adds, the Government's family-related welfare policies have on the one hand been grossly insensitive to problems inherent in the so-called model family, and on the other become badly out-of-date.

The *model* or *conventional family* fosters and sustains gender inequality where women are expected to be subordinate to and financially dependent on men, and where women's place is thought to be the home. The AAF objects strongly to such gender inequality. It further points out that the *model nuclear family* which the Government upholds and promotes has been gradually giving way to other family types such as lone-person families and single-parent families where women are most vulnerable and in need of help. The AAF is concerned that as such women do not belong to the model nuclear family, they may be marginal to the Government's family welfare provisions.

The AAF also considers the Government's *family life education* launched in 1979 to be only perpetuating the gender prejudice and discrimination in the Government's family-related policies. The objective of family life education is to enhance mutual understanding and harmony among family members so as to strengthen *family solidarity* and to enable the family to more effectively perform its functions. But the kind of family which *family life education* aims to support and strengthen is the *model nuclear family* we mentioned above. As such, *family life education* in the AAF's view has been fostering and encouraging by and large traditional Chinese family values and practices which perpetuate power imbalance and exploitation within the family. In other words, while the Government has intended to use *family life education* to foster family solidarity and to enhance the *natural* and *traditional* responsibility of the family, the AAF is saying that family solidarity and responsibility based on subordination and exploitation should be critiqued and rectified rather than strengthened.

We see views similar to those of the AAF in a number of academic publications on the subject of women and the family in Hong Kong (Salaff 1995; Ng 1991, 1995; Lee 1992; Chan 1997; Leung 1998; Kwok 1997; Leung 1995). Chan (1997) for instance has argued that the Government's public housing policy caters primarily to the needs of the *conventional family* with the consequence that lone mother two-person families have been marginalized or bypassed. The lack of childcare services especially government-subsidized services, Chan adds, further confines women to the home as child care is expected to be women's duty. Public assistance, Chan further points out, is provided on a family basis, and the husband may exclude his wife from any share of the welfare benefit. Leung (1998) follows the AAF's footsteps in critiquing the Government in putting the welfare responsibility primarily on the family, for in effect this means putting the burden mainly on women within the family. In particular, Leung shows in her study how under Hong Kong's social security system, many lone mothers are driven to become welfare dependents and stigmatized as undeserving welfare claimants, while some lone mothers are deprived of welfare benefits due to their lack of knowledge and power. And Kwok et al (1997) have summed up the critique by pointing out that the *family ideology* has been the Government's means of shifting the welfare responsibility onto women:

‘Either by espousing the family ideology in some welfare measures, or through inadequate provision of other services, the government sheds her responsibility of providing welfare onto women in each family. These have always been done under the pretext of preserving the Chinese family tradition in caring for the aged and the infirm’ (Kwok et al 1997: 251).

The Hong Kong Family: Positions and Discourses

We may now take stock of our discussion so far. From the Government’s position of ‘preserving and strengthening the family’, we turned first to the view that the Government has not been doing enough in this respect, and then to the argument that preserving the family may well mean perpetuating problems of inequality within the family. In effect we are raising a host of questions: Is the current form of family and the so-called family tradition worth preserving and strengthening? Should we not see the alleged *family breakdown* as a breakdown of familial ties founded on power imbalance and exploitation, as a movement towards and a search for alternative family forms and familial relationships? Should we not replace the language of *family breakdown* and *family in crisis* with the language of changes and developments in family forms and familial relationships? Do people now living in alternative family forms – such as the single-parent family, the singleton family, the lone-mother family – welcome or regret the new familial arrangement? These are questions with no simple and straightforward answers. They are indeed questions about different ways of looking at and thinking about the family. They are different discourses on the family and they underlie the ‘family’ views and proposals which we surveyed above. We will now take a closer look at them.

The first discourse, which we may call the *conservative discourse*, implicitly and sometimes explicitly takes the conventional nuclear family as the model family and advocates ‘preserving and strengthening’ this model family. This is also the Government’s discourse on the family and is most clearly reflected in the objectives and contents of its *family life education*, which aims to improve the quality of family life through educating its members to dutifully accept and perform their familial roles.

Some critics of the Government’s family-related policies espouse what we may call a *middle-of-the-road discourse*. Chow (1996) for instance takes the passing of *traditional Chinese family values* as the sign of an impending family crisis and beseeches the Government to adopt a coherent and positive family policy to avert it.

‘... if the traditional values no longer dominate and the families in Hong Kong are taking on new values and beliefs and are changing rapidly their functions, then there would be a case for the formulation of a family policy ...’ (Chow 1996: 59).

‘In short, can one be content with a policy which aims at not more than preserving, and at best strengthening, a social institution and its functions which are admittedly undergoing drastic changes ... ?’ (Chow 1996: 65).

Chow is critiquing the Government for not keeping up with the changes, for not having a policy which is family-centred and which can effectively mobilize resources to serve the family *as a coherent unit*. He is not critical of existing familial relationships and he seems to be apprehensive about family changes. Yet he urges the Government to do more *for* the emerging alternative family systems and relations.

The position of the Council of Social Service, which we examined earlier, is strikingly similar to Chow's. The Council, however, is more systematic and comprehensive in its *family* diagnosis and prognosis. It sees the Hong Kong family as going through a crisis and facing the prospect of breaking down. It thus implicitly takes some (hypothetically) existing or pre-existing family as a model family. Its stance is conservative in this respect. Yet in urging the Government to formulate a family policy, the Council demands that this policy serve diverse forms of families, rather than striving to support a preconceived type of conventional familial arrangement and relationship. Indeed the Council considers it important to acquire more knowledge of the diverse forms of family that have been arising so that Government policies (or family policy) can target at the problems and needs which these families face. The Council recommends more research in this respect. It is worth highlighting that the Council, like Chow, considers it important that the Government have a family policy.

The views of the AAF and those who critique existing familial arrangements and relationships and advocate changes belong to what we call the *reformist discourse*. The essence of this discourse is very well captured in the following statement from the AAF:

'The assumption behind *family life education* and many forms of family service is that problems which occur within the family are "family" problems, and that "family" problems are problems arising from family members' deficiency in knowledge, skills, and appropriate attitudes. This is indeed a naïve assumption' (AAF 1990: 127; original text in Chinese - our translation).

The AFF argues that many 'family' problems have their roots outside the family, and that we are only fooling ourselves in believing that 'family' problems can be solved through improving communication and understanding among family members. The effort of the Government and many NGOs to enhance family solidarity in the hope of solving family problems is in the view of the AFF misdirected. The AFF is therefore opposed to a family policy that aims at strengthening the unity and harmony of the family without tackling problems of inequality, especially gender inequality, in the family and the larger society.

'*Family life education* and other social policies ... promote strengthening the family as a unit. But these policies overlook the fact that the familial arrangements and relationships which they aim to strengthen are an important basis for the reproduction of gender inequality' (AFF 1990: 128; original text in Chinese – our translation)

Family Policy Proposals: Family Solidarity and Its Implications

We hope to have shown that different discourses on the family give us different and even opposing views on the Hong Kong family, on family problems and family solidarity. These discourses also contribute to different views on family policy and different family policy proposals.

We noted above that both Chow (1996) and the Council of Social Service (2001) criticized the Government for not having a family policy or a family-centred strategy in policy-making. This lack of a family policy, Chow and the Council further argue, means an absence of direction and objectives in the Government's welfare services for the family. In other words, the Government has attempted to provide for family needs, to remedy family problems, and to strengthen family solidarity without a clear idea of what kind of family it intends to promote. In addition, the lack of a family-centred policy renders the Government's family-related policies contradictory, often having the effect of weakening rather than enhancing family unity. For these reasons, Chow beseeches the Government to formulate and adopt a family policy with clear objectives. These objectives, Chow further points out, should include the following: preserving the family as a coherent unit for the provision of care and welfare for its members; providing the family with societal support when necessary; linking the family effectively with other institutions; making the family a place of comfort and security and not fear and oppression; enhancing the functioning of the family; and finally rendering the interests of the family and its individual members complementary.

The family policy proposal from the Council of Social Service (HKCSS: 2001, chapter 5) is far more comprehensive. It offers not only a detailed justification for the necessity of a family policy in Hong Kong and a statement of the objectives of such a policy, but also a blue-print for action. Many of these objectives are similar to those listed by Chow and we will here focus on those which appear to us to be the Council's unique and grand vision. This grand vision is succinctly captured in the Council's suggestion that 'the Government adopt a **"family-centred"** and **"community-based"** strategy' (HKCSS 2001: iv; emphasis in the original document). This community-based strategy, which Chow also alludes to in his recommendations (Chow 1996: 69), would enlist the support and involvement of the community (such as non-governmental and non-profit making organizations or the so-called third sector) to jointly work with the Government and the business sector towards 'strengthening family functioning, and establishing a "family-friendly" environment' (HKCSS 2001: 15; original text in Chinese, our translation). Here we will not go into the *practical* details of this family-centred and community-based strategy, but we would like to comment on its significance. In proposing this strategy, the Council is in effect taking the family as the cornerstone and the most important unit of society, and using the family as the basis for building a cohesive caring society through mobilizing the support of the community. The Council's position seems to be this. An effectively functioning family is good for the individual and society and social cohesion, so the community should be encouraged and mobilized to strengthen family solidarity and family functioning. In turn, the community's unity of purpose and effort in this

family-oriented grand project will contribute to social cohesion. In a way we have arrived where we started.

But before we return to where we started, we need to also take note of the position of the AAF on a family policy for Hong Kong. There is not much to say in this respect because the AAF has not proposed a family policy for the Government's consideration. Indeed the AAF objects to the Government and non-governmental social service organizations taking the *family as a unit* in the planning and allocation of social service provisions. If the family harbours inequality, exploitation and oppression, the AFF argues, we must get inside the family and get to the individuals inside the family to understand and redress these family members' discontents and problems. If there are "family" problems, the AFF contends, it is because the family follows and reproduces some of the dominant values, practices and relationships of the larger society. The AFF does not support a family-centred policy because it does not believe that the family (as it is) should be the centre of social policy. The AFF does not advocate the strengthening of family solidarity because it does not think that the solidarity of the current Hong Kong family is worth upholding.

Conclusion: Returning to Family Solidarity and Social Cohesion

We can now return to where we started by revisiting the question: what lessons can we draw from the above discussion of the Hong Kong family and family solidarity to bear on the study of social cohesion? We may begin by pointing out that we have, perhaps only implicitly, treated the *family as society writ small* so that what we say about the family and family solidarity can have a bearing on what we say about society and social cohesion. Here we will focus on *family solidarity* and what we hold to be its parallel *social cohesion*.

We would first note that underlying each discussion or advocacy of family solidarity, we can detect some value position, or objective, or ideology regarding the family. Behind the Government's rhetoric of 'preserving and strengthening the family *as a unit*', we see the Government's objective of using the family as the primary provider of care and welfare so as to lighten the Government's burden in family welfare provisions. Chow (1996) sees the decline of traditional Chinese family values in the face of rapid social changes as aggravating family problems such as divorce, lack of care for the elderly and the young, and abuses within the family. This prompts him to recommend a family policy aiming to promote family solidarity and a family environment 'where members find comfort and security and not fear and oppression' (Chow 1996: 437). In a similar vein, the Council of Social Service advocates a family policy to promote family solidarity to avert the crisis of family breakdown and its associated social problems, and also to build a cohesive caring society. On the other hand, the Association for the Advancement of Feminism and those who share its position critique the promotion of family solidarity as the perpetuation of inequality and exploitation within the family. Here we may add that in advocating a family policy and promoting family solidarity, both Chow and the Council do consider one of their primary objectives to be the elimination of inequality and oppression within the family.

In their paper on the concept of social cohesion, Chan et al observe that ‘social cohesion is one of the many social values’ (Chan et al 2003: 12). This suggests that there are governments and people who *value* social cohesion just for the sake of unity. This seems to be a valid view as social unity or social cohesion does appear to be a goal worth pursuing in itself. In a similar way, family solidarity appears to be a social value. But we have discovered in our survey of the discussions and discourses on the Hong Kong family that family solidarity is promoted (or critiqued) not for its own sake, but as a means to realize other values and objectives. We argue here that it is no different in the case of social cohesion. We argue here that any *policy* discussion of social cohesion inevitably involves values or goals that the discussants deem to be important. We therefore hold the view that as a concept for *policy* research, *social cohesion* necessarily involves values, goals or ends. But this does not mean that we are advocating the means-end approach which Chan et al in their paper interpret it to be:

‘This approach considers cohesive society as an *end*, but defines social cohesion in terms of the *means* through which this end can be achieved’ (Chan et al 2003: 5).

It is not our task here to debate the correctness of this interpretation of the so-called means-end approach. But it is very obvious that we would not take a cohesive society as an end (in the same way that we would not take family solidarity as an end) in a definition of social cohesion. Indeed we would object very strongly to taking a cohesive society as an end. We see the rationale behind Berger-Schmitt’s conceptualization of ‘social cohesion as the two societal goals’ of ‘reduction of disparities and social exclusion’ *and* ‘strengthening of the social capital of a society’ (cited in Chan et al 2003: 5, table 1). It is obvious that Berger-Schmitt is not taking a cohesive society as the end and social cohesion as the means to achieve that end. In our view, he is proposing a conceptualization of social cohesion which is inextricably bound up with certain societal goals. Indeed, Chan et al are telling us this, despite their interpretation of the means-end approach which we cited above:

‘Berger-Schmitt (2000) points out that social cohesion *involves* two analytically distinct “societal goal dimensions” ...’ (Chan et al 2003: 5; our highlighting)

Social cohesion, like family solidarity, is indeed a social value. Because of this, we think it is important and in fact necessary to make clear what we consider to be valuable about social cohesion and to include these values (and goals) into our conceptualization of social cohesion. We have argued that social cohesion is not valuable for its own sake, in the same way as family solidarity is not valuable for its own sake. We believe that Berger-Schmitt (2000) has pin-pointed very well what is valuable about social cohesion, and we believe that he has proposed a *valuable* concept of social cohesion for policy research. It is of course possible to propose a *value-free* concept of social cohesion, as a social situation where the parts stick together or fit together to form a united whole. But we see no *value* in such a conceptualization, especially when it is meant for policy research.

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