An Existential Narrative Approach to Parent Education

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The social context of parenthood in Hong Kong

The discourse of globalization urges parents to accept that their children will experience swift economic, social, and technological changes in the future, thus many parents are in the crossroads of finding effective ways to help their children grow, adapt, and survive in the globalized world.
Parental Anxiety

Contemporary societies are characterized by a growing consciousness of risks and individualized efforts to manage or avoid the potential dangers accompanying swift economic and social changes (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991).

The role of a parent is transformed into that of a “risk manager” who is in the crossroads of choosing effective ways to protect their children from potential risks and dangers.
Parental Anxiety

Owing to the prevalence of the discourses that individuals and families should meet the inevitable challenges of the globalized markets characterized by fierce competitions, parents are reported to have become more anxious in helping their children to pursue life goals and career plans.

Parents have long held themselves as responsible for the life outcomes of their children in traditional Chinese culture (Wang & Chang, 2010).
Impact of Parental Anxiety on Child Development

Standardization of life and career paths

My dad, mom and teachers would have high expectations and they often said ‘if you can’t enter university, you have to say good-bye. But if you can go into university, you’ll be…’ They keep nagging in my ears as buzzing bees. If I can’t get into university, what should I do? This is my problem.
Impact of Parental Anxiety on Child Development

Focusing on comparison rather than self-actualization

The mass media like newspapers or news reports also talked about university students who swept streets. Supposedly, you go into university in order to raise your competitiveness, and the chance you will do the job of this kind will seem to reduce.
Impact of Parental Anxiety on Child Development

Emphasizing efficiency and immediate outcomes rather than relationship and commitment
Impact of Parental Anxiety on Child Development

Emphasizing multitasking rather than concentration

I think it’s too excessive that nowadays the kids need to learn everything including swimming and all other skills. I see that many children have many extra-curricular activities. It is doubtful if parents could do so many things as well? They start going to school at 7:00 every morning and attend different classes afterwards until they sleep at 10:00p.m. It is really tough for kids doing this day by day. We don’t even go to work for such a long time!
Standardization

Comparison

Multitasking

Efficiency
Parental Anxiety as a Discourse

• Overlooking the nuances and variations in parenting experiences and neglecting the socio-cultural influences on parenting.

• Parents proactively draw on their biographical narratives and other socio-cultural resources to make sense of their experience and figure out their personal responses.
Positive side of parental anxiety

• Parental anxiety as a form of existential anxiety

• Anxiety occurs at the point where some emerging potentiality or possibility faces the individual, some possibility of fulfilling his existence, but this very possibility involves the destroying of present security, which thereupon gives rise to the tendency to deny the new potentiality (May, 1983).
Paradox of Parenthood

High Level of Parental Meaning vs.
High Level of Parental Stress vs.
High Level of Parental Efficacy
Positive side of parental anxiety

• From an existential point of view, being a parent is involving in a life project that provides life-changing experiences for both parents and their children (Hannush, 2002).

• As the term “existence” means literally “to emerge”, it is best used to describe a constant state of discovering, evolving, and becoming in parenthood.
Why Existential?

• When parents discover the core personal meaning of being a parent, they will engage in doing what is worthwhile in parenting.

• Parents are considered to be gaining skills in a way that makes a difference only if they discover the personal meaning and become aware of the feelings associated with applications of those skills.
Why Existential?

• It emphasizes the exploration of parental meaning and tries to work with the life process of awareness in order to bring parents the possibilities of a richer and more meaningful childrearing experience.

• It highlights the need to strengthen the interconnectedness and maximize the opportunities for children to learn and grow.
Example:
Experiential Exercise

Imagining that you are going to die, what are your worries or regrets? Please name three.
Why Existential?

• Rather than anxiously following the standards and expectations set by the dominant parenting culture, parents are ready to engage in inner reflective dialogues and become inner-directed by the awareness of their own cherished values and meanings.
Why Existential?

“When the baby was just born, every daddy and every mommy would say being healthy is enough and growing up happily is enough. But when the kids grow up, your expectations of them also grow! This parent education program is like going back to the basics. Being healthy and growing up happily are really enough! And I realized one thing. I would refocus my purpose of parenting.”  

(Ms. Pak)
Why Existential?

- When parents are more ready to embrace their life experiences, they are more fully present in their encounters with their children, and therefore can “see” their children as they really are.
“Be aware that in fact many children are very special, every child is unique, or maybe we ourselves also have our own personality, our ways of doing things. The same child put under the instruction of different people will have different effects, will generate different sparks.”

(Ms. Fok)
Why Existential?

- Confronting anxiety rather than trying to eliminate it.

- Although parents still feel pressure to help children survive in a globalized society, they can find their own inner voices, resources, and power, so they feel more empowered to transform their parental lives in terms of self-enhancement and decision-making in the course of childrearing.
More readiness to negotiate parental choices and dilemmas amid uncertainties

“I think oftentimes this society has instilled a lot of values in us. There are a lot of influences blowing unto us, twisting many of our values. And we start to think [that] it’s important to study at certain schools and attend certain classes. I myself was oftentimes freaked out by what other neighbors or friends or parents said and did. But after attending this program, you would become clearer about what is really important, that is, what are the best things you could give your child.”

(Ms Nam)
Why Narrative?

- Human beings are invertebrate storytellers.
- We use stories to make sense of our lives.
- The formation of one’s current state and present identity is not a sudden event but is built upon the organization of a person’s lived experience, usually through the format of stories.
Why Narrative?

- The parental self can be thought of as a narrative or a story, capturing the temporal and dramatic dimensions of human existence.
- Parents can regain a sense of mastery of life by constructing a coherent, meaning-giving narrative of the parental self.
Consolidation of the parental identity through telling life stories

I like this kind of parent group because I could sit down and have a chance to review my life experiences…I seldom gave myself a moment to reflect on my life and share with other people my feelings. There were many exercises in the group that could help me revisit my past and reconstruct meanings of it.

(Kitty)
Rediscovering gains and accomplishments in being a parent

“You can remember the beautiful life episodes in this process, which can help reassert a sense of mastery in facing future challenges. You will not only focus on problems or family conflicts, which are in fact trivial. There were many good things that you did in the past such as working together with your spouse to build the family and nurture your children. When you think about these, you will experience the personal growth and development.”

(Simon)
Awareness of the role of emotion on parent-child relationship and interaction

“These workshops can provide opportunities for me to think about my life, to reorganize, and to round up issues. For me, this serves as a great alert in my future childrearing process. When anger emerges, I will alert and remind myself, that this has nothing to do with my child’s behavior. Then, I can calm down.”

(Ms. Kan)
Learning from other parents’ stories

“Although we had similar experiences in parenting, some group members had different reflection on those experiences. Their reflections stimulated me to use other perspectives to think about the meanings of parenthood.”  

(Ann)
Intervention Process

- Stage One: Enrichment of life stories
- Stage Two: Storytelling and interpretations of their stories (such as life themes and existential concerns)
- Stage Three: Exploration of new stories and new interpretations (such as existential anxiety, and resilience in life)
- Stage Four: Actualization of the new stories
Training of practitioners

- To train existentially- and narrative-oriented parent education practitioners, a strong emphasis is placed on sensitizing the practitioners’ own existential concerns and narrating their own life stories.
Mode of delivery

• As this approach conveys a message that there is no shortcut for learning how to parent, it is necessary for practitioners to engage people in the learning process if the program is to succeed.
Research and Evaluation


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