

Building Strong Families in Singapore: A Qualitative Study of Family Strength and Family Resources



**Catholic
Family Life**

Background

- Despite the government's efforts to promote strong family ties, the median duration of marriages that ended in divorce in 2021 was 10.7 years. Additionally, between 2017 and 2021, the average annual number of marital dissolutions was 7,479, which is comparable to the annual average of 7,441 between 2012 and 2016 (SingStat, 2021).
- Catholic Family Life (CFL) has seen an average of 15 therapy cases per month in 2020, with 10% presenting with family problems and 48% with marital problems within the first 10 years of marriage.
- Beyond working with families in distress, also CFL offers a wide variety of programmes (i.e., parenting programmes to raise emotionally resilient children, positive and flourishing relationships for couples etc.) catered to the promotion of strong families.
- Yet, despite the emphasis on promotive and restorative family work, the constitution of strong families in the Singaporean context remains unknown.

Background

- Over the past three decades, researchers have studied families from a strengths-based perspective and uncovered a set of qualities that describes the characteristics of strong families(Defrain et al., 2007; Nimtz, 2011).
- Importantly, viewing families from a strengths-based perspective emphasises that families should be viewed for its internal family functioning to promote positive relationships and support healthy child development (Defrain et al., 2007).
- Family strength is thus likened to the concept of family resilience, which is described by Walsh (1998) as the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful (Lietz, 2006).
- Therefore, family strength is defined as the set of relationships and processes that support and protect family members, specifically during times of change, that represent core communicative processes and relationships which serves as coping mechanisms and resources during times of stress and adversity (Schrodt, 2009).

Background

- Despite recommendations for family strength research to investigate family functioning, the literature on strong families and marriages in Singapore is limited only to cross-sectional descriptive data on the attitudes of Singaporeans (Matthews et al., 2015).
 - Satisfaction with marriage and family
 - Close family ties
 - Intergenerational contact
 - Ability to mobilize family for social support
 - Strong family values
- This paper is Phase 1 of a broader study on strong families which utilizes a mixed methods approach that takes place in across three phases.
 - 1) Exploratory design to qualitatively explore the concept of strong families and marriages amongst Singaporeans.
 - 2) Quantitative phase connected to the initial qualitative results (Clark et al., 2008).
 - 3) In-depth qualitative exploration with family service practitioners on whether the findings can be translated to practice and to uncover new resources that social service agencies like CFL can adopt in supporting the building of strong families and marriages.

Aims

- Pertinent to Phase 1, this paper aims to understand perceptions of Singaporeans on the factors that strengthens or threatens strong families and marriages, and how do families navigate challenges through their relationships and communicative processes, while using their internal and external family resources. This paper seeks to answer four research questions:
 1. How do Singaporeans define strong families and marital relationships?
 2. How do long-term married couples in Singapore build and ensure a strong relationship and positive communication patterns?
 3. How do Singaporeans view family and marital commitment throughout difficult times?
 4. What are the common stressors faced by families and how do families overcome these challenges?

Participants

- Participants were recruited through social service agencies, CFL Affiliates and Associates, social media channels, and through personal contacts.
- All participants interviewed were above 21 years old and are Singaporean or Permanent Residents.
- Participants (N = 47) were recruited in two phases, the first phase was through convenience sampling (n = 38), and the second phase was through purposeful sampling (n = 9) of under-represented participant demographics (i.e., non-Catholic, and not Chinese participants) to allow for a more balanced view of families, their strengths, and their challenges.

		Total Interviewed (N = 47)		Total Coded (N = 34)	
		N	%	N	%
Life Stage	Pre-Marriage	9	19.1	6	17.6
	Married 0 - 5 years	8	17.0	7	20.5
	Married 6 - 10 years	4	8.5	4	11.7
	Married 11 - 20 years	8	17.0	3	9.1
	Married > 21 years	13	27.6	8	23.5
	Single Again	5	10.8	6	17.6
Religion	Buddhist/ Taoist	3	6.5	2	5.2
	Catholic	20	42.4	13	33.8
	Christian	4	8.5	4	11.7
	Hindu	10	21.2	3	9.1
	Islam	5	10.7	8	23.5
	Freethinker	5	10.7	4	11.7
Race	Chinese	23	48.9	19	36.2
	Malay	12	25.5	10	26.0
	Indian	9	19.1	4	11.7
	Others	3	6.5	1	2.6
Highest Education	No Degree	11	23.4	8	23.5
	Degree and above	36	76.6	26	76.5
Gender	Male	19	40.4	14	41.2
	Female	28	59.6	20	58.8

Methodology

Procedure

- All participants were administered the Participant Information Sheet to indicate their consent in taking part in the interviews and/or have their interview recorded.
- All consented participants were briefed by the Principal Investigator (PI) on the purposes of the study, and that participants can exit the study and/or skip any questions throughout the interview without any penalty.


Interviews

- In-depth, semi-structured interviews (approx 45mins) with 47 participants who were interviewed as individuals or with their partners.
 - a) Participants (n = 38) were interviewed using a list of interview questions that sought to understand broadly what the participants thought of strong families and/or marriages and how they overcame challenges within their family and/or marriage.
 - b) Participants (n = 9) were interviewed using another set of similar interview questions that delved deeper into family resilience given its relation to the concept of strong families.

Methodology

Analysis

- Interviews that had participants' consent (n = 43) for recording were transcribed.
- The transcripts were coded into themes (i.e., inductive analysis) and then compared with the existing literature on building strong marriages and families (Chih-Pei & Chang, 2017).
- All transcribed interviews were coded until a point of data saturation (n = 34).
- Major themes (i.e., mentioned spontaneously across more than 20% of the coded interviews) that subsequently emerged were identified.
 - To note that the findings should be interpreted in which the absence of interview sentiments does not necessarily indicate its absence in the organic relationship of the participants.



1. How do Singaporeans define strong families and marital relationships?

BELIEFS AND VALUES OF A STRONG MARRIAGE

Engage in common interests / activities outside together

Believing in nurturing a relationship that supports life together

Intimately knowing your spouse

Working on a nurturing life that supports each other


Support and understanding

Strong moral values / virtues

Faith in God / Religiousness

Teamwork

Shared goals



1. How do Singaporeans define strong families and marital relationships?

BELIEFS AND VALUES OF A STRONG FAMILY

Have specific responsibilities

We think on behalf of each other

No matter how difficult things get, our family sticks together

In our family, we try not to take one another for granted

Looking after their grandchildren (more than 1 source of social support)

Believing that parenting responsibilities should be shared

Spending quality time in great quantity

Having shared ethical values

Have warmth and care

Characteristics of Strong Families

- In descriptions of strong families, many of their views reflect the themes of “intergenerational contact”, “close family ties” and having “strong family values” which concurs with the attitudes of Singaporeans in Mathews et al., (2015).
 - **Intergenerational Contact** is described by participants when grandparents or in-laws look after their grandchildren. This form of support was described to enable families to have more capacity to take care of their children, build intergenerational connectedness, allow other members of the family to work, and enjoy a better quality of life.
 - **Spending quality time in great quantity** is actively described in having close family ties. This is mainly described by the key words: “every/over the weekend”, “have meals/dinner together”, “make time for my family/ try to be there”, “do things together”. This theme reflects Defrain et al.’s (2007) description that strong families tend to spend quality time together.
 - **Strong family values in the form of ethical and/or religious values** is described as the bedrock to strong families. Participants often talked about “teaching values” to their “children”. The importance of shared values was highlighted when in the absence of it, “it would be very hard for us to stay together”.

Characteristics of Strong **Marriages**

- In descriptions of strong marriages, participants' views heavily support the literature on marital longevity and satisfaction (Nimtz, 2011; see Table 2) – in particular, the idea of **“intimately knowing your spouse”** was mentioned by most participants.
- In addition, participants also described how **“sharing a common goal”** and **“working on a nurturing life that supports each other”** played a key contributor to their relationship satisfaction and longevity.
 - Intimately knowing your spouse is described by participants as the ability to “discover/find more things about the person” which leads to a “deeper understanding” of how their partners react to situations, their “likes and dislikes” and “what is important to them”. Knowing their partner well have allowed couples to “live with each other” and reduced their conflict.

Characteristics of Strong Marriages

- Pertinent to the Singaporean context, majority participants shared a common aspiration of “having a house/BTO together” in addition to the topics of finances and having children. Such goal setting is deemed as important in any “serious relationship”. Participants married for more than 10 years described that having shared goals have allowed couples to achieve “alignment” in their relationship in “the early stages” and have built the relationship up for the “long term/long run” by “keeping the relationship going”.
- Working on a nurturing life that supports each other is tied to action – in which, descriptions of positive changes in relationships over time (i.e., “our communication has improved a lot over the years”) was mentioned as part of a strong marriage. This is associated with key words like “growing together”, “learn along the way”, “things changed”.

2. How do long-term married couples in Singapore build and ensure a strong relationship and positive communication patterns?

MARITAL COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Having a consensus on goals and directions

A give and take

Flexibility

Compromise

Addressing conflict without criticising the other's character or personality

Playfulness, enthusiasm, humor, and affection during conflict resolution

The willingness to forgive and to be forgiven

Emotional regulation strategies (individual)

Being in a safe space

2. How do long-term married couples in Singapore build and ensure a strong relationship and positive communication patterns?

FAMILY COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Sharing needs and feelings

Listening to emotions

Careful observation about how individuals deal with life issues

Thinking from each other's perspective

We can discuss our differences openly

Emotional regulation strategies (couple/family)

We accept each other despite conflict

Having reflexivity

We often talk about things we have done during the day.

Family and Marital Conflict Resolution Strategies

- Emotional regulation strategies is a key factor brought up across majority interviews. Emotional regulation strategies such as “giving each other space” is consistently employed within the family/relationship to “help each other” “cool down/manage their emotions”.
- Individual emotional regulation is reflected in descriptions of being able to ask for personal space to “calm down/have a breathing space” especially when they are “angry”. While calling for a “time-out” is the most common strategy employed to “avoid saying things I don’t mean”, participants also recognize that they will “come back to it again when [they] are feeling better” or when “[they] are ready”
- Addressing conflict without criticising each other and being able to accept each other despite conflict is also a pertinent theme encompassed by having “respect” for each other, avoiding blame and “not saying things we don’t mean” in times of conflict.
- Being able to be “flexible” and “compromise” to “forgive and be forgiven” emerged as common strategies for marital conflict resolution (see also, Gottman et al., 2006).

Family and Marital Communication Patterns

- Positive communication is described as “**being open**” and “**saying what you want to say**”, with the other party “**being able to listen well**” to hold “**vulnerable**” conversations.
- The ability to “**listen to emotions**” and “**think from each other’s perspective**” are described as important skills in maintaining a healthy communicative environment in marriages. These sentiments reflect the definition of a validating marriage as described by Gottman (1994) – which describes couples who are open to compromise and calmly work toward conflict resolution as virtuosos of communication, having developed a keen ability to listen to and understand the other’s point of view.
- **Having conversations about their daily life** is shared across most participants in describing a desirable and/or positive family environment. In addition, the mode of such conversations differs across families – in which some families mainly have them over “dinner time” and others on “WhatsApp”.

3. How do Singaporeans view family and marital commitment throughout difficult times?

MARITAL COMMITMENT

Love

Belief that marriage is an important social and religious institution

Commitment to the spouse

Hard work

FAMILY COMMITMENT

Despite our busy schedules, we find time to be together

Family and Relationship Commitment

- The topic of commitment comes to mind when thinking about family or marital strength – which is described amongst participants as being able to “stay together throughout no matter the ups and downs”.
- This is concurred by Nimtz (2011) in which “Action,” referring to the work and effort participants invested in the marriage relationship is a major theme in marital longevity.
 - In families, the ability to **find time to be together** despite busy schedules is a hallmark of family commitment.
 - In marriages, the idea of **hard work** reflects commitment to overcome troubled times. This theme is commonly described with the keywords: “effort/work”, “give it your all in your relationship”, “no matter what happens”, “it is a work in progress”. The idea of commitment is also tied to an individual responsibility to uphold their wedding vows.

4. What are the common stressors faced by families and how do families overcome these challenges?

STRESSORS/SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Financial situation

Parenting

Family Relationships (in laws)

FAMILY RESILIENCE

Initiative to take charge of one's circumstances

The presence of at least one significant support person during adversity

Acceptance

Looking after each other in the family

4. What are the common stressors faced by families and how do families overcome these challenges?

HELP SEEKING ORIENTATION
Self-reliance
Experts (including workshops)
Online
Family
Religion
Friends
Community Support

Family Resilience and Help Seeking

- Sentiments reflect the literature on the key factors promoting family resilience, which includes the ability to access internal and external support, find meaning in the struggles faced (appraisal), as well as relying on spirituality (Schrodt, 2009).
 - **Having initiative to take charge of their circumstance** is demonstrated as a key factor to family resilience. For instance, families were self-reliant in being flexible to adapt to their circumstances.
 - The **presence of at least one significant support person** during adversity was also described as a protective factor in overcoming challenges. As reflected in characteristics of family strength, having intergenerational support in caregiving is often cited as a common support for families. Beyond grandparents, the presence of “god parents”, “relatives”, “a trusted friend” and having a “domestic helper” were described to support families through times of adversity. These support networks were said to help in caregiving and provide encouragement to families.
- **Religiosity** is another aspect of help-seeking amongst majority participants. Being able to “know that things will be okay during times of difficulty” gave meaning to the participants’ lived experiences. Families also “prayed” together during adversity. Such sentiments are also concurred across different faiths.

Characteristics of Strong Families

Characteristics of Strong Families

- Having specific responsibilities
- Thinking on behalf of each other
- Sticking together regardless of challenges
- Not taking each other for granted
- Looking after grandchildren
- Believing that parenting responsibilities should be shared
- Spending quality time in great quantity
- Having shared values
- Having warmth and care

Family Resilience

- Initiative to take charge of one's circumstance
- The presence of at least one significant person during adversity
- Acceptance
- Looking after each other in the family

Family Commitment

- Despite our busy schedules we find time to be together

Stressors and Resources

Personal Resources

- Emotional regulation
- Spirituality
- Self-reliance

- Family background and demographics
- Personal demographics

Environmental Resources

- Experts
- Online
- Family
- Religion
- Friends
- Community and governmental support

Stressors (i.e., financial situation, parenting stress, conflict between family members)

Family Conflict Resolution and Communication

- Ability to discuss differences openly
- Accepting each other despite conflict
- Having self-reflexivity
- Often talking about things that has occurred during the day

Marriage Conflict Resolution and Communication

- Having a consensus on goals and directions
- A give and take
- Flexibility
- Compromise
- Addressing conflict without criticizing the other's character or personality
- Playfulness, humor and affection during conflict resolution
- Willingness to forgive and be forgiven
- Being in a safe space
- Sharing needs and feelings
- Listening to emotions
- Careful observation about how individuals deal with life issues
- Thinking from each other's perspective

Characteristics of Strong Marriages

- Engaging in common activities together
- Believing in a nurturing relationship that supports life together
- Working on a nurturing life that supports each other
- Intimately knowing your spouse
- Support and understanding
- Strong morals/virtues
- Religiosity/Faith in God
- Teamwork
- Shared Goals

Marital Commitment

- Love
- Belief that marriage is an important social and religious institution
- Commitment to spouse
- Hardwork

Characteristics of Strong Marriages

Discussion

In general, the findings from this study support the definition of family strength defined by the set of relationships and processes that support and protect family members, specifically during times of change, that represent core communicative processes and relationships (Schrodt, 2009).

Strong support for the literature in three aspects:

- a) What constitutes marriage satisfaction and longevity (Nimtz, 2011)
- b) The characteristics of strong families universally (Defrain et al., 2007; Schrodt, 2009) and locally (Matthew et al., 2015)
- c) Family function in terms of their communicative patterns (Defrain et al., 2007; Schrodt, 2009), and family resilience (Lietz, 2006)

Discussion

In investigating family functioning:

- a) Overview of the strategies (i.e., emotional regulation, addressing conflict without criticising each other) that were adopted and acknowledged as useful to promote positive communication and conflict resolution within the family system.
- b) Describes how family resilience is being portrayed (i.e., having at least one social support, taking charge of their circumstance).
- c) Outlines the internal (i.e., spirituality, self-reliance) and external resources (i.e., using the internet, relying on experts) that families orientate towards when overcoming challenges.

Discussion

In conceptualizing Strong Families and Marriages from this study:

- a) Emphasize that family strength also encompass a set of actions (e.g., actions that indicate commitment) present in their daily functioning.
- b) The outcomes of strong families are indicated by the growth of relationships within families, knowing each other more intimately and being able to communicate more effectively through crises.
- c) It is also interesting to acknowledge that characteristics of strong families (i.e., having intergenerational support) are related to processes in communication (i.e., accepting each other despite conflict) and family resilience (i.e., the presence of at least one significant support person during adversity).

Cultural Specificity

- Specific to the Singaporean context, characteristics of a strong family and/or marriage (i.e., intergenerational contact, shared goals) appear to reflect societal norms around family and the responsibility of caring for the elderly in a collectivist culture.
- These beliefs appear to be consistent across time (i.e., see more at Matthew et al., (2015).
- Likely indicate that while the characteristics of strong families are universal (i.e., spending lots of quality time together, being able to manage stress and crises, having a sense of spiritual well-being; Defrain et al., 2007; Schrod, 2009), such characteristics can be culturally influenced and present differently across countries.

Limitations

- Given the presence of only one Principal Investigator, there might be a lack of inter-rater reliability in interpreting interview sentiments and coding it consistently into themes.
- To overcome such limitations in validating the codes, the formation of a code book was consistently referenced to the definitions of key constructs (i.e., communication, commitment) in the literature
- Principal Investigator had consulted with CFL Family and Marital Practitioners in having an alignment to certain interpretations and wording of major themes throughout the study.

Conclusion

- To gauge the impact of the themes identified in this study, these themes are mapped onto the quantitative Phase 2 questionnaire by inspiring key constructs and measures of family/marital strength that are most closely associated with the themes.
- To also ascertain the frequency of these ideas, their variation across participant characteristics, and their link with family outcomes.
 - Note that the scales adopted in Phase 2 does not entirely reflect characteristics of strong families/marriages (i.e., Singaporean perceptions of shared goals).

