Levels of Intimacy between British Chinese Parents and Children

The pursuit of human relationships and connecting with others is a universal and common human experience. Seen as one of the most important features of life, relationships have been described as ‘The raw materials by and through which personal biography; family and social structure are framed and constructed’ (Cooney 2000:13). Intimacy in a relationship is most frequently associated with sex and sexuality. This can be attributed to early analytical work, where the focus was upon the emotional functioning of heterosexual relationships, often within the context of marriage, where ‘The coupling of intimacy with sexuality and sexual/sensual relationships was not unpicked’ (Gabb 2008:67). However, within broader understanding, intimacy is also commonly related to displays of love, affection, trust and cohesiveness between friends, family and other close associates. If we are to take the available definitions and conceptualisations of intimate relations as involving various aspects of positive interaction and experience between two people (such as the display of love, cohesion, attachment and connectedness), then intimacy is arguably found within various relationship types, including the parent–child attachment.

Parent–child relationships are portrayed as the most intimate and significant attachment due to profound psychological and social bonds. For example, attachment theory postulates that the parent–child relationship is the starting point for an individual’s experience of intimacy, as well as laying down the foundations for all intimate relations and understanding (Bowlby 1969). Intimacy also appears to provide feelings of acceptance, warmth and sensitivity, as well as an
appreciation of self (Prager 1995). Intimate relations have a positive impact upon people's health and well-being (Epstein 1994). Reis and Shaver (1988) added that intimacy within a relationship can exert a direct and positive impact upon the way a relationship functions because of the value of its own reward.

As intimacy can be conceived as a broad and overlapping concept which relates to notions such as closeness, affection, security and attachment, to name but a few, Berry (1969) recommended that intimacy should be seen in its broadest terms and advised against an imposed definition. Accordingly, this chapter explores notions of parent–child intimacy within a variety of behaviours, interactions and experiences of which the British Chinese parents and children spoke. By exploring parent–child intimacy, a deeper understanding of the day-to-day lives and functioning of contemporary British Chinese households is revealed. Additionally, as intimacy levels appear to be interlinked with other aspects of family life and relationships, a clearer picture of children's agency and parenting approaches can be gained of the British Chinese household.

8.1 Intimacy and culture

Views of intimacy are seen to differ across cultures, and may not be universally shared or understood (Broude 1987). Accordingly, it would be possible to argue that the differing perspectives within Chinese and Western culture may influence the intimacy levels between contemporary British Chinese parents and their children. Within Western or individualist societies, the construction of self as a separate and autonomous being coincides with the values placed upon the exploration and expression of individual feelings. However, the values placed upon intimacy and intimate relations within individualist societies may not be applicable to other cultures. For example, individualist societies are said to place greater emphasis upon self-disclosure for enhancing intimacy than collectivistic cultures, where the well-being and harmony of the group (e.g. the family, society and the state) takes precedence over the individual.

Within traditional and contemporary Chinese culture, achieving and maintaining social order and interpersonal harmony are key (Chen et al. 1999). In this context, Chinese values are based on a willingness to put one's own agentic strivings aside and to foster the