Practice research on social work responses to a community health crisis in Hong Kong's public housing estates

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Abstract

This study explores social work responses to the Coronavirus disease 2019 community health crisis in the Hong Kong public rental housing estates community. By articulating the process in which social workers respond to community needs, this study explores the idea that the nature of community social work is habitual and formed by a series of purposive coping actions rather that deriving from plans and proposals. The habitual state of conducting community work is further explored through the lens of sense-making and *modus operandi*, where it highlights a practitioners' enactment and embodiment. Seventeen social worker teams in fourteen public rental housing estates are engaged. Individual monthly Zoom meetings are employed as the primary research method, in which they are conducted in the form of open-ended dialogue. With a dwelling mode of practice research in which researchers are fully immersed into the practices of front-line social workers, intersubjectivity, collective

sense-making and co-construction of reality and practice take place. Based on our findings, we highlight the importance of recognizing social work practice as a confluence between preconscious and conscious being.

Introduction

This study demonstrates how a specific version of practice research could be used to explore the 'within' approach to study social work practice. One of the main characteristics of this version is its emphasis on the blur between the knower and the known. Taking a dwelling mode, researchers are immersed in the process of social work practice and to dig out its 'insights'. This study takes the opportunity to be involved in a community development program which focuses on seventeen community projects in Hong Kong. By adopting a dwelling mode of practice research, researchers focus on how social workers respond, adapt, and cope with an evolving community context during the 'fifth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic' (hereafter fifth wave).

The onset of the fifth wave presents a valuable opportunity to explore how planned social work activities are compromised by the evolving context in which interventions take place. Although the project was not originally designed to address the challenges posed by Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the emergence of this fifth wave has significantly impacted the original planning and implementation of the project. This situation has inadvertently allowed the research team to examine and reflect on the nature of social work practice through the lenses of the 'practice turn' and the 'strategy-in-practice' framework, which the team aims to utilize to better understand how community workers worked through the obstacles of social capital building presented by the fifth wave during lockdown of the Hong Kong community.

Why practice research?

Practice research is an umbrella concept that spans a continuum from the 'hardcore' positivistic approach, such as single case system design, to the 'constructionist' approach recommended by scholars like Shotter, Cunliffe, and Gergens. This latter perspective suggests that researchers should focus on the situated actual practices that constitute strategy and strategizing while simultaneously reflecting on their own positions,

perspectives, and practices. Practice is believed to be the process through which social entities, including organizations, social institutions, and actor identities, are constituted prior to the formation of strategies. In contrast to assuming 'the prior existence of a "self-contained individual [entity] confronting a world "out there"', as Ingold (2000) argues, this view regards all social entities as the result of social accomplishment through practices. Practices are seen as constitutive of social reality itself.

Our research is also informed by Orlikowski's three modes of engaging practice in research. As Orlikowski (2015) noted, 'These three modes of engaging practice in research are not mutually exclusive, but they can be understood as entailing differing assumptions about the power of practice to produce the world. As a result, they have different implications for how practice studies are understood and performed' (p. 33). In Orlikowski's typology, the first mode focuses on practice as a phenomenon, asserting that practices matter and should be investigated when studying organizational reality. The second mode emphasizes practice as a perspective, positing that practices shape reality in specific ways that need to be explicated through practice-theoretic accounts of organizational phenomena. The third mode views practice as a philosophy, claiming that practices constitute reality; thus, studies of organizations must be grounded ontologically, theoretically, and empirically in ongoing, lived practice (Orlikowski 2015: 37).

Aligning with these three modes of engaging practice in research, we therefore focus on the details of everyday activities, particularly the 'messiness' of everyday realities, through intensive and extensive fieldwork. In essence, we were conducting an 'immersive' inquiry that highlights the importance of the dwelling worldview that encourages researchers to capture the richness of practitioners' lived experiences and the 'subtle maneuvers' associated with intervention and strategizing—elements often overlooked when focusing solely on declared explicit activities, as opposed to the building worldview that assumes a 'given' external social world that researchers can analyse 'objectively' (Chia and Holt 2006). Meanwhile, the tacit forms of practice have been emphasized, as 'deliberate strategising activities are themselves dependent upon prior practice-shaped, socio-cultural *modus operandi*; strategy actors are never fully autonomous in their strategic deliberations and hence the choices made' (MacKay, Chia, and Nair 2021: 1340).

Research method and design

This study is part of a three-year practice research project running from 1 December 2020 to 30 November 2023. Titled 'Evaluation as Learning Tools: Practice Research for Public Rental Housing Projects', the project

collaborates with seventeen social worker teams stationed in fourteen new public rental housing estates in Hong Kong. Its overall aim is to generate indigenous practice knowledge on social capital formation within these communities, empower practitioners to conduct their own practice research, and provide feedback on current evaluation methods. All funded public rental housing community development projects have four overarching objectives to achieve, including (1) enhancing the adaptive competencies of new residents, (2) fostering a strong sense of belonging among residents, (3) establishing a 'block representatives' mutual support system, and (4) promoting networking among local organizations and businesses.

This practice research adopts the 'dwelling worldview' and begins from the perspective of the practitioners to understand practical reasoning and knowledge of practitioners *in situ*. Besides, from the perspective of a processual worldview, everyday practices serve as the locus that organizes the messy processes of life. Through daily interactions, individuals, societies, and the environment are constantly co-constructed into who and what they are. Consequently, research on practice does not position researchers in a detached role of analysis; instead, researchers are expected to intimately immerse themselves in the realities of practitioners, in a way proclaimed by Chia and Rasche (2010) as a dwelling mode of research. Thus, we as researchers strived to stay as close as possible to the practices of the social workers implementing the public rental housing estate community development projects. Where feasible, we conducted participatory mode working with the social workers and engaged in discussions with them afterward. We also established a WhatsApp group to facilitate communication, sharing and mutual understanding between practitioners and researchers. More importantly, we held regular Zoom monthly meetings with individual practice teams in the form of open discussions throughout the three years of the project. This approach enables us, as researchers, to 'get a feel' for how they work, observe their practices, and, at appropriate times, participate in their processes of planning, sensemaking, and implementation through dialogue.

The actions of practitioners are always constrained and enabled by both the immanent strategy arising from the *modus operandi* and their own practices. As implied by the second mode of 'engaged research' by Orlikowski (2015), our research work also constitutes the 'reality in question' rather than merely representing or passively reflecting it. Therefore, we, as researchers, are 'enacting' reality. By making reference to this model as our meta-theoretical framework, we are effectively engaging in 'engaged research' (Cunliffe and Scaratti 2017). We used dialogical sensemaking to make the lived experiences of research participants both sensitive and sensible, fostering a collaborative relationship between researchers and participants with the aim of co-

constructing 'useful knowledge' that impacts the projects in question (Cunliffe and Coupland 2011). Recognizing the potential for different constructions of reality among all parties in any research project, dialogical sensemaking ensures the vitality of multiple voices and open communication. Our use of workshops and dialogues facilitated dialogical sensemaking throughout the research process.

Furthermore, the third mode, which asserts that practice constitutes reality, is essential and foundational. It underscores the importance of researchers focusing on the implications of the first mode of engaging practice, which emphasizes taking practice as a phenomenon. Researchers must immerse themselves in the daily lives and activities of participants, engaging deeply in the social contexts where participants construct and experience their living systems in action. Such 'immersive practice' necessitates the application of Chia and Rasche's concept of the 'dwelling worldview' (2010).

During the fifth wave, we maintained monthly meetings and dialogues with individual teams, tailoring the format to each team's capacity. This entailed shortening meeting durations, and some teams transitioned to bi-monthly meetings with periodic check-in messages and phone calls. These conversations covered a range of topics pertaining to the pandemic situation, such as the estate's condition and social workers' encounters with residents and community stakeholders, their ongoing intervention programmes, how social workers collaborated with government and institutional policies, their emotions and intuition *in situ*, possible next steps, and the research team's observations and discussions on other teams. Articulating these episodes allowed for collective participation in sensemaking for both the research team and social workers, as it reconfigured what the two parties observed, felt, said, and did. The episodes were then formulated into narratives and stories about the happenings of the fifth wave while also providing an avenue for understanding social workers' judgments and enactments. Social workers' perceptions and awareness of the crisis varied in each team and estate, and when discussing the implementation of new programmes with certain teams, we sometimes positioned ourselves as working partners to alert social workers to infection and outbreak risks and encourage them to consider alternative possibilities.

In May 2022, as the fifth wave was brought under control, the research team reviewed, coded, and conducted constant comparisons on fifty-two meeting recordings in accordance with the guidelines of classical grounded theory. Practice models were developed to document social workers' responses to community needs, including the collection and distribution of both tangible and intangible resources, as well as the constraints and barriers they faced and how they overcame them. We deliberated on how social workers made sense of their practices and how we interpreted their practices and our interactions with them. We

adopted an analytical building mode to explain why and how social workers remained active in their professional practice during the fifth wave crisis.

The data collection is in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent forms were obtained before data collection.

Social work, community development, and social capital building

Unlike social work profession in countries like the UK, community development remains a cornerstone of social work in Hong Kong, adhering to a tradition that emphasizes active community participation and social transformation through the mobilization of local strengths and capacities. But one of the conventional bases for government intervention through social work remains on 'public rental housing'.

The Hong Kong SAR Government established funding in 2002 to support NGOs and social service organizations in implementing social capital development projects within new public rental housing communities. Besides promoting social inclusion, these projects aim to build social capital by fostering mutual trust, cooperation, and social cohesion, as well as enhancing support among individuals, families, and organizations. Through volunteer training and collaborations with local organizations, schools, and the commercial sector, social workers organize programmes and activities designed to help residents adapt to their new living environments, promote supportive community networks, and strengthen residents' sense of belonging.

The focus on social capital building as a strategy for community development is well founded. Yet, social capital is not only about resources, relationships, trust, and norms; it is also about performance. It involves the ability and behavioural patterns of a social group in action (Jackson 2019). In essence, it is a question of 'how'. As Jackson points out, social capital entails 'the ability to sustain cooperative (aggregate social-welfare-maximizing) behaviour in transacting, the running of institutions, the provision of public goods, the handling of commons and externalities, and/or collective action within a community' (Jackson 2019: 315). Therefore, social capital building is also a matter of competence building in practice—effectively promoting community participation, mutual assistance, support, and social inclusion through strengthened community networks. These networks, in turn, reinforce a sense of belonging, enhance the social connections of individuals and families, and broaden the support base available to help them resolve problems and address common concerns.

Social workers' positioning during Covid fifth wave

Over the first twelve months of involvement with seventeen teams of community social workers, we observed that their practices tended to be more context-dependent rather than strictly adhering to their original proposals. The outbreak of fifth wave, an unprecedented event, went beyond the scope of the social workers' planning and expectations. Their responses were more accurately described as improvised, adaptive, and resourceful rather than the result of any planned activities.

During the peak of the fifth wave, when the entire Hong Kong community was under lockdown, social workers primarily used WhatsApp platforms to mobilize networks with residents, resident volunteers, and community partners to address critical needs. These networks were instrumental in sourcing scarce resources such as testing kits, medical supplies, daily commodities, and food, as well as in soliciting donations and purchasing necessities through various channels. Volunteer networks, comprising residents and church partners, collaborated with social workers to distribute the workload. This included checking in on elderly residents, packing resource packages tailored to individual needs, and organizing both regular and same-day urgent delivery arrangements. By participating in these social networks, one social worker team was able to comprehensively reach all the residents of the estate block they served. Information flow within the estate was maintained as residents proactively shared updates from social workers as well as their personal networks and provided feedback on residents' situations. Additionally, residents were willing to share their personal experiences of being infected with COVID-19 to support others who were ill. There are numerous instances of mutual aid behaviour on these online platforms. Residents actively used digital communication platforms to seek help and offer support, particularly through the exchange of extra supplies. These collective efforts explain the absence of tragic events related to the fifth wave outbreak and lockdown.

The positions of the social workers in facilitating the mutual aid behaviours of the residents online are pivotal. Our analysis shows that there are thirteen distinct positions played by social workers during this period that contributed to the effective, collaborative, coordinated, and resilient management of the COVID-19 lockdown.

In examining social workers' interventions and positions during the fifth wave in fourteen public rental estates. we aligned with a process view that prioritizes the immanent logic of practice over individual actors and subscribed to the view that 'events, individuals and doings are to be manifested as instantiations of practice-complexes; ontological priority is accorded to an immanent logic of practice rather than to actors and agents' (Chia and MacKay 2007: 219). Being 'immanent in the socio-culturally infused *modus operandi* and predispositions of an organisation'

(MacKay, Chia, and Nair 2021: 1338), this logic became apparent through practitioners' discursive construction of their practice stories, providing insight into how social workers' actions were understood and positioned within their professional context (Harré and Langenhove 1991). Based on dialogues with social workers, we categorized their enactment into thirteen positions, which are presented in Table 1.

Positions 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, and 11 represent activities performed in public areas by all seventeen teams. As requisite activities dictated by circumstances, they reflect the *modus operandi* of the prior practice-shaped socio-cultural habits of community social workers in Hong Kong. These align with the tradition of community social work in which workers assist grassroots people in organizing themselves to fight for their rights in the public sphere. Consequently, social workers have long been accustomed to working with these people without offices or spatial facilities. They implemented their role by being on-site with their service users in their localities and communities, holding meetings, discussing issues, and developing local leadership.

With this habitual mode of intervention continues to shape the practice of social workers when running their projects, the predominant forms of intervention activities take place in public areas, such as on roadsides or in estate playgrounds. This is a familiar mode of intervention that seems to echo the transition of community social work from the more politically oriented activities to those more focused on building residents' social networks and enhancing their sense of belonging through the provision of recreational and educational activities in the new public rental housing estates in the past twenty years.

The lockdown of communities during fifth wave rendered conventional face-to-face contacts between social workers and resident groups in public spaces defunct. Social workers found it very difficult, if not impossible, to rely on conventional practices for their various roles, such as providing humanitarian aid, emotional support, mediating conflicts, elucidating ever-changing government policies on COVID, and coordinating supplies. This presented a challenge for social workers to swiftly shift their conventional practice to working with people online.

Phone calls and WhatsApp became the primary electronic means to maintain communication and provide emotional support among residents. Some activities were also organized online. As digital platforms became central to most activities, it became increasingly important for social workers to ensure their reliability and credibility. Social workers often found it necessary to connect with other groups and bodies, such as medical organizations and government departments, to obtain reliable knowledge and information. They also needed to prevent some residents from taking advantage of these public online platforms for private interests, such as using them for commercial activities.

Table 1. Social workers' positions in COVID fifth wave.

Social workers' position	Specifications
1. Humanitarian aid	Social workers' provision of tangible assistance
2. Humanistic care	Social workers' provision of intangible assistance
3. Supplies collection and distribution	Social workers' collection and distribution of supplies catered to community needs
4. Announcements and information dissemination — Increase residents' morale and confidence	Social workers would publish public announcements to increase residents' morale and confidence and answered to residents' enquiries. Some teams have dedicated a 24/7 hotline for residents to phone in or message
— Members recruitment	Many teams operate on a membership system, in order to ensure residents could receive important information, social workers would publish public announcements to recruit member
— Dissemination of information	Social workers would disseminate COVID-related information and policy updates to residents
5. Mediator	Social workers acted as mediator when conflicts among residents arouse
6. Covid protection	Social workers provided protection gear for volunteers and front-line community workers to minimize infectious risks
7. Holding impromptu summer holiday activities	In response to March–April 2022 impromptu summer holiday announced by the government, social workers held summer holiday activities catered to children's needs
8. Emotional support	Social workers would offer emotional supports or activities pertaining to it under the scope of social capital and project objectives
	The scope of support would also extend to COVID-related emotions such as frustration and anxiety
9. Being a core hub for cross-sectoral platform	Social workers are key actors in connecting various cross-sectoral collaborators in provide COVID-related support
10. Initiation of snowballing effect on tangible and intangible services	Snowballing effects in the provision of tangible and intangible COVID-related services were prevalent, many of which were initiated by social workers within community networks
11. Elucidation of government COVID policies	Upon residents' enquiries on government policies, social workers would elucidate the policies
12. Residents representatives	For estates that have not gone through residents intake and was transformed to temporary quarantine centres, social workers acted as representatives for residents in the expression of concerns and opinions to various stakeholders
13. Monitoring of digital platforms	Social workers had to monitor residents interaction within digital platforms to ensure them being a safe place to opinion exchanges

Social workers' positioning is not determined by deliberate preplanned strategies, but rather is the outcome of ongoing interactions among social workers and with other involved parties. The outbreak came so suddenly that social workers were thrown into a state of chaos and uncertainty, yet they were expected to respond to the changing circumstances immediately. In the midst of this shifting and ambiguous reality, the practice of social workers is best described by an approach characterized as 'prospective wayfinding and know-as-they-go', as they responded to unfolding moments through a series of 'purposive everyday practical coping actions' (Ingold 2000; Chia and Holt 2006).

Purposive acting, according to Chia and Holt (2006: 648), is 'to attend to resolving an immediate impediment at hand, to seek relief from an undesirable situation without any presumption that this is directed towards some overall, longer-term outcome'. Indeed, as social workers attempted to ease the effects of fifth wave in their community and to break through the restraints of limited manpower and resources, their swift decisions to mobilizing community networks became a series of strategic actions that emerged as they continued to cope with the situation.

Sensemaking in COVID-19

In a world characterized by constant flux and evolution, human experience is mediated through both sensory and intellectual channels. This is particularly evident within a processual worldview, where life is conceptualized as an evolving flow in which everything and everyone is inherently relational. In this context, the senses, emotions, and bodily reactions of social workers play a crucial role in how they enact our experiences into reality during the fifth wave. The practice of social workers can be understood through the lens of sensemaking.

According to Weick (2001: 15), sensemaking is the mechanism through which we enact our environment. It is a process that 'introduce[s] stability into an equivocal flow of events by means of justifications that increase social order'. Being a retrospective process of rationalization and justification of one's actions and feelings (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005), sensemaking is particularly critical within the field of social work, as it underpins practitioners' interactions with their environment and bodily reactions, their attribution of meaning and significance to sensory inputs, and their subsequent judgements.

For example, when conventional methods of needs-based assessments, like surveys and interviews, were deemed impractical during fifth wave, social workers' senses and gut feelings became their source of enactment. They made sense of the happenings in the community through distress calls from residents, relied on their gut reactions when engaging with the community, and used their first-hand experience when sourcing

essentials. Social workers were compelled to rely on their tacit understanding of community dynamics and their embodied knowledge to interpret subtle cues in the absence of formal data collection mechanisms.

> When a mother called me, she was breaking down. She has two 8-year-old sons, one was infected showing strong symptoms and she didn't know what to do. I then shared experiences of other residents to her and she was able to secure medicine for her son. In fact, we had to rely on and share out our residents' experiences on how to handle the situation. In a way, we are like a consultant. I don't know how I could teach and explain to you (research team) how we do things, as I myself couldn't fully know the situation in the estate, that is why we're anxious, we kept thinking how we could best support our residents. (Meeting quote from Team 16)

> Our estate is located on the hill, shortage of supplies was more severe than those living near the city. When we went to source for supplies, we (social worker) experienced it first hand—we could not buy essential commodities, even when we searched way out of the estate area. Which made us think that it was impossible for elderlies and single parents to bare infection risks and search for resources everywhere, therefore we needed to support our residents. (Meeting quote from Team 05)

Through dialogues in regular Zoom meetings with social workers, we gained insight into their sensory experiences, tacit knowledge, and subsequent actions and reactions. To assess community needs and required services, social workers utilized various offline and digital channels, leveraging their tacit community knowledge. These channels facilitated connections with residents, organization staff, and community stakeholders for COVID-related activities and engagements. Three types of needs were identified: residents' needs, digital platform-related needs, and volunteers' needs. Social workers' responses varied; most suspended routine activities to focus on fifth wave responses, while some continued nonfifth wave activities. This variation in approach provides insight into how social workers interpret their environment, process sensory inputs, and formulate actions. By exploring these differences, we can better understand the decision-making processes and adaptive strategies employed by social workers during the crisis.

> We plan to hire a shuttle bus during the residents intake period so residents don't need to walk a few blocks, as the COVID situation is getting severe, registration and crowd management is needed to get on the shuttle bus, but we also wish to reduce any negative impacts to other residents. If you measure the cost of the shuttle bus, it's not cheap. However, we think it's worth it as it is useful in promoting our project, building our relationships and reputation with the residents and the Housing Department, the programme may be crucial in building a deeper relationship with residents in the future. We need to further think about the operation design of the whole programme. (Meeting quote from team 17)

This excerpt shows that social workers' sensitivity to infection risks of confining a group of residents in a shuttle bus was low. Meanwhile, it also reveals a complex web of relationships between the social work team and various actors. The current situation differs significantly from the 1980s, with the relationship between social workers, residents, and government departments now more intricate. New public rental housing estates are managed by subcontracted real estate companies, requiring approval for activities proposed by social workers or residents. Due to limited space for executing activities, social workers must maintain 'good' relationships with organizations both within and outside the estate. The management company becomes the most crucial 'working partner'.

This context helps understand the sensemaking process of this specific social work team. In early 2022, this team began organizing activities for incoming residents. With the management company's invitation, social workers viewed the shuttle bus provision as an indication of support, expecting to realize their plan. However, at that time, we felt there were indications of a potential outbreak due to rapidly increasing infection rates. Our close working relationship with the social workers obliged us to alert them to potential risks and discuss with them possible safety measures. Our inputs are in line with a dwelling mode of research. We were involved with social workers in constituting both our realities and reactions, rather than being detached observers. In this case, the research team's involvement facilitated conversations that led to different sensemaking results and positioning.

The modus operandi of social workers

Among the positions listed in Table 1, social workers' provision of humanitarian aid and humanistic care became controversial in the context of lockdown. Their practical coping actions in tackling fifth wave evolved into strategic actions with a consistent response pattern, reflecting their *modus operandi*. Chia and Mackay (2023: 21) define this as 'an organisation's tacitly shared, historically shaped pattern of social practices. It ensures the non-deliberate patterned consistency of responses taken by members of an organisation in a wide variety of circumstances … it is a matter-of-fact, accepted way of doing things and responding to situations internalised by its members'. However, when lockdown was promulgated, the continuation of social work practice appeared to deviate from both government policies and those of relevant social work organizations. This raises the question: Why did social workers remain active and continue their service during lockdown?

Our fieldwork consistently revealed that social workers consider needs fulfilment the essence of their intervention. They view it as crucial for relationship building, believing that once residents' needs are met, other

intended and required outcomes can eventually be fulfilled. For community social workers, needs fulfilment is their *modus operandi*, their habitual approach to work. This *modus operandi* should not be misunderstood as a set of working directives from an external governing entity; rather, it is a commonly agreed-upon way of doing things and behaving; contextual to social functions, practices, and cultures in which one is immersed. Chia and Mackay (2023) note that *modus operandi* 'exerts a widespread "unthinking" predispositional influence on daily activities' for actors at all levels of a socio-organization. During the fifth wave, social workers' prioritization of fulfilling needs was further amplified in their provision of relief work, with social workers interpreting their services as humanitarianism:

> Within our unit, we did discuss if we were in the position to do front-line support, and the point of consideration was humanitarian aid. The situation [lack of support, daily commodities, food and medicine] was urgent, as the district councilor and our team were the only service provider in the estate, we were their first and only point of contact. (Quote from Team 05)

It is noteworthy that during our dialogues with social workers, neither the concept of 'needs' nor 'humanitarianism' was substantially defined or clearly explained. What emerged clearly, rather, is that needs fulfilment based on humanitarian grounds has been a consistent practice reflecting their *modus operandi* in their community work with the communities. Evidently, *modus operandi* formed the basis of social workers' actions during fifth wave, which plunged their work context into a state of chaos and extreme uncertainty.

Discussion

Contrary to traditional assumptions practice comes from intellectual thoughts, following well-elaborated plans, and theoretical reasoning, our findings show that it is social workers' embodiment, their habitual and automated response that take precedent. From the worldview that everything is relational to each other, hence dialogue takes place through intra-actions and interactions. The relational dialogue within a social organization with a collectively shared identity constitutes and in a way reinforces a *modus operandi*.

In applying Chia and Mackay's (2023) ideas of *modus operandi* to strategic actions, we argue that a majority of the time, the (strategic) actions of social workers are operated on a preconscious level. In drafting up implementation plans for future programmes and project development, social workers take a more detached position compared with their front-line practice. While this temporary detachment is more of a building mode, their planning and decisions are in fact closely influenced by their *modus operandi* and habitual states. Therefore, in the process of

practice and making choices, it is in fact a combination and simultaneous effect of being 'conscious and unconscious', the confluence of a bodily and intellectual response.

This return to an embodied practice echoes the social-theoretical insights thrown by the 'practice turn', which shall be extended to understanding the field of social work practice. Highlights of a practitioner's embodiment inevitably question the preference of the prominent propositional knowledge over practical experience in existing professional training. As pointed out by Flyvbjerg (2008), 'social "theory" cannot be context-independent because what counts as a relevant feature to the theory is context-dependent'. While theoretical reasoning, intervention theories or practice principles and models have its referencing values, it begs the question if such shall take the central stage of social work education and training.

The findings also suggest a need to renegotiate current supervision approaches in senior managerial levels. Due to differences in positioning, it is common for managers and supervisors to adopt a detached mode as they look at and assess front-line practices. Social workers' practical coping through their sense-making can easily be perceived as acting without a strategic plan, 'winging it' so to speak. Front-line workers are often asked to explain and justify as to why their decisions and actions did not go according to plan. Here we must bring in the philosophy of Wittgenstein (1953: 109) as he says 'we must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. [For] these are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognise those workings: in despite of an urge to misunderstand them'.

The building and dwelling mode of strategic actions (see Chia and Mackay 2023; Chia and Holt 2009; Chia and Rasche 2010) by social workers also have implications on how we do practice-based research. To engage in practice-based research requires researchers to look into the *phronesis* of the practitioners, their tacit being that is dynamical and contextual in nature. To research on practice is to look into practitioners' judgement, reactions and actions *in situ*, by immersing researchers into the practices of social workers and dwell with them. Without a bird-eye view of how things should be and go, we allow situations and practices and henceforth their inquiries and findings to unfold.

This approach of research allows us to discuss various possibilities of coping with the fifth wave. We always maintained a nonhierarchical scholarly position in the process of dwelling. Such process, we must bear in mind, has to remain fluid. For Hernes (2014) writes 'studying things as process is obviously not about comparing states of being in time or in space, but about how something persists and changes in view of becoming "otherwise possible"'. The collective construction of a shared reality between researchers and practitioners, together with the shared reflexivity between the two parties in being aware of our own influences, enable

the construction of useful situated knowledge that bridges academic to practices on the ground.

The use of digital platforms with video recording provided great advantage in facilitating ongoing reflection for both the research team and social workers. Dialogue between researchers and practitioners, as well as each *modus operandi* is made possible through monthly Zoom workshops. Data collected through Zoom meeting recordings shows not only verbal cues but also facial expressions and situational ambient, by which we can capture more emotional interchanges between researcher and practitioner and adjust the mode of inquiry accordingly.

During the pandemic, the International Federation of Social Work identified six themes relating to social workers' ethical challenges and responses (Banks et al., 2020). A summary and mapping of the six themes and social workers' experience and reaction is presented as follows.

The six related experience and response show the salience of the six themes, for us to understand the social workers' ethnical and emotional

Table 2. Social workers' ethical challenges and responses.

	Themes	Social workers' experience and response
1	Creating and maintaining trusting, honest and empathic relationships via phone or internet with due regard to privacy and confidentiality, or in person with protective equipment	The success of the social workers in responding to the fifth wave community outbreak is largely due to their prompt concern with community needs arising from the pandemic, and their focus on personalized style of intervention which strictly protected the privacy and confidentiality of residents.
2	Prioritizing service user needs and demands, which are greater and different due to the pandemic, when resources are stretched or unavailable and full assessments often impossible	Circumventing strict policy restraints stipulated by the government and social work management, certainly indicated the importance in prioritizing service users' needs and demands, because most of the issues arising from fifth wave were fatal.
3	Balancing service user rights, needs, and risks against personal risk to social workers and others, in order to provide services as well as possible	The use of *metis* in mobilizing volunteer networks is another manifestation of such a balance.
4	Deciding whether to follow national and organizational policies, procedures, or guidance (existing or new) or to use professional discretion in circumstances where the policies seem inappropriate, confused, or lacking	Similar to the reaction to point 2, the social workers' concern with providing humanitarian aid strongly support their decision to put less weight on policy.
5	Acknowledging and handling emotions, fatigue and the need for self-care, when working in unsafe and stressful circumstances	The WhatsApp group formed with social workers provided mutual support in every aspect
6	Using the lessons learned from working during the pandemic to rethink social work in the future	Social workers' learning can be internalized though their *modus operandi* as discussed in earlier sections

experiences during the pandemic while overcoming challenges within the community and institution.

Conclusion

The outbreak of fifth wave brings a halt not only to society as a whole, but also disrupts the work plan of social workers. Although unfortunate, this period allows us to further understand the nature of social work. Social workers based their practice on personal and professional habits even with a proposal in hand. Our inquiry into social work responses during the fifth wave shows evidence of social workers' sensory taking precedent over their deliberate judgements and planned actions. How social workers make sense of crisis in the communities, how they position themselves and achieve outcomes, and how they went out of their way to fulfil community needs. In all these instances, we can see that social workers are almost improvising, acting without plan and reacting automatically. The notion of *modus operandi* and habitual is discussed to explain why social workers can enact upon their emotions and successfully response to the fifth wave crisis.

Our findings further shed light on the need of rethinking how we shall do social work education and supervision—a return to one's embodiment and practice instead of an unquestioning prominent favouritism over theoretical reasoning and detached thinking and being. Rather, there shall be a balance of being conscious (detached building) and unconscious (immersive dwelling) in engaging with knowledge in social work practice. Discussions on engaging in immersive practice research shows the need of bringing reflexivity into practice-based research for researchers to be aware of their own tacit being and knowing when engaging with practitioners and participate in their experiences, thus allowing collective construction of useful knowledge.

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