Reflecting on mistakes in practice among social workers in China

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Abstract

Reflection is widely practiced in human service professions, but little research has examined whether reflection actually translates into action and, if so, how. This article explores the possibilities and limits of reflective practice by drawing on data collected through reflective interviews with fifteen Chinese social workers on mistakes in practice. The findings demonstrate that social workers in China are aware of being reflective, even critically reflective, by pondering mistakes and failures they have encountered. Their reflections, however, do not extend to future action plans. Rather, they prefer to rely on manual-based knowledge providing explicit guidance, reflecting their developing reflective capacity and low professional identity. The article argues that social workers' reflective awareness needs to be built up, while fully recognizing the limits of reflection. To address mistakes, not only do we need to create opportunities for practitioners to reflect, but also to address the risk-management strategies of social work organizations and the independent roles that should be performed by professional social work associations in Mainland China.

Keywords: Social worker; reflective practice; mistake; reflection; reflective interview; professionalization

Introduction

Reflective practice has long been a vital tool in social work (Fook et al., 2000). It is used to deal with complex problems and uncertain judgments so as to improve the quality of services provided in human services professions (Avby, 2015; Boud et al., 2006). Given the complexity and conflicts in their daily work, social workers often find themselves performing actions, making statements, or holding beliefs that unintentionally fall short of their principles. However, from the perspective of reflection, such mistakes and failures offer unique learning opportunities. Therefore, it is important to understand the specific conditions under which mistakes occur and what can be drawn from the experience (Dillon, 2003).

Unlike Western countries where the social work profession draws its roots from civil society, the development of social work in Mainland China has been rapidly promoted as a result of top-down government actions (He and Chui, 2016). The instrumental role of social work is frequently mentioned in national governance reform (Liu et al., 2012). Social workers are required to be proficient in providing professional help to service users and contributing to social governance. Principles on "professionalization," "indigenization," and "values and ethics" of social work in Mainland China are still being formulated (Munford and Sanders, 2011). Capacity building is also in its early stages. As social workers experience failures and mistakes during this uncertain stage, their reflections are often criticized or ignored, indicating a tendency towards pragmatic professionalism (Lei and Huang, 2018).

This study explores why and how Chinese social workers' reflections are obstructed in practice, through investigating their management of mistakes. We first reviewed literature of the types and levels of reflection, specifically focusing on professional mistakes as a tool

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for reflection, possible factors causing mistakes, and suggested coping actions. We then invited social workers from diverse professional backgrounds to participate in a reflective interview in order to share their experiences of and reflect on mistakes in practice. Analysis of the nature of social workers' understanding and reflection on their mistakes—their self-assessments and self-analyses—offered insights about the complex and challenging context of their professional development. Based on the research findings, we further discuss how to promote reflective practice individually, organizationally, and as a profession.

Reflection in social work practice

Reflection is considered the foundation of good social work practice. It has received considerable attention in social work development and has been incorporated into professional standards, for instance, by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work in the UK (CCETSW, 1990), the Health and Care Professions Council in England (HCPC, 2017), and the National Association of Social Workers in the US (NASW, 2017). In Hong Kong, there are bylaws that stipulate the requirements for social workers' professional competence: the Hong Kong Social Worker Registration Board (2015) outlines the criteria to determine the competencies that a social worker must acquire, and critical reflection is considered a priority.

What should be explored through reflection in social work? How should we envisage the types and levels of reflection in practice? Goodman (1984) describes three levels of reflection: reflection to attain given objectives, reflection on the relationship between principles and practice, and reflection incorporating ethical and political concerns. While

Goodman (1984) focuses on "analysis" and "evaluation," Brown and Rutter (2008) maintain that "description" and "learning" provide a more comprehensive way of examining reflection. The field becomes more complex when later studies attempt to categorize different types of reflection. Following Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) and Ruch (2009), Taylor (2010) summarizes three categories of reflection—technical, practical, and emancipatory—which, respectively, deal with new empirical knowledge that improves instrumental action, new interpretative knowledge that helps us understand interpersonal human experience, and new critical knowledge leading to liberation from oppressive forces in society. Reflection is seen as a means to build a bridge from self-dialogue to instrumental action.

To link knowledge with practice is the vital empirical significance of reflection. Traditionally, it has been thought that reflection allows social workers to develop a more nuanced understanding of formal theory and knowledge (Kondrat, 1999). This view has been questioned because there is a clear gap between formal theories and the realities of practice (Camilleri, 1996, 1999). Recently, critical reflection is seen as a means of turning social workers' practical experiences into effective theoretical principles (Fook, 1996, 1999). Many scholars support this constructive approach: social workers should use reflection to reappraise their knowledge and recreate themselves through self-study (Fook et al., 2000; Ellström, 2001; Boud et al., 2006). Even given the rise of manual-based practice, social workers in the West maintain that practice approaches characterized by reflection, proven experience, and tacit knowledge should not be subordinated to manual-based treatment, evaluations, and assessments (Ryding et al., 2018).

Professional mistakes in reflection

In social work, as in other professions, reflection often follows on from mistakes because unexpected failures create uneasiness. Mistakes force social workers to analyze their practice more deeply (Sicora, 2017, 2018). In order to reduce the damage that arises from mistakes, social workers must be willing to analyze their mistakes and the rational and irrational motivations that led to the mistakes. The need to take the unpleasant emotional experience produced by a mistake and turn it into an occasion of positive re-evaluation, to analyze one's own contribution to a mistake, and to create a more reasonable action plan in the future are the three most powerful spurs to the process of reflection.

When identifying mistakes, we must look at the implications for service outcomes, the relationships involved in the service, and social work's professional standards. According to Reamer (2008), a mistake in social work is defined as any event producing some kind of harm or loss of opportunity in either clinical service or the broader social structure. A mistake could be a failed intervention, the use of a wrong plan to achieve an aim (Gallagher, et al., 2003), or a deterioration in the relationships between a service user, a social worker, and the welfare system (Sicora, 2017, 2018).

When conducting self-analysis after a mistake, the main task is to attribute causes to the mistake. Dillon (2003) argues that a mistake is often caused by "a kind of attitude, behavior, feeling, response, communication, situation arrangement or work strategy that undermines the intended purpose or specific interest" (pp. 14-15). In his study of social workers in Italy, Sicora (2010) identifies more factors contributing to mistakes: lack of time, undeveloped relationship between the service provider and users, inadequate organization,

lack of training, and psychological factors, such as inattention and anxiety. Schulz (2010), in contrast, focuses on social workers' beliefs and maintains that mistakes arise when theoretical beliefs confront complex reality. Mistakes, then, are likely to occur due to time constraints, poorly organized interventions, and inadequate assessments, and these, in turn, are generally the result of personal and psychological factors.

Reflection can lead to positive ways of coping with mistakes. Ethical self-evaluation at the personal level is one of the fundamental principles of social work: social workers have an ethical obligation to be forthright and truthful with service users (Congress, 1999; Loewenberg et al., 2000). Learning from mistakes also operates at the organizational level. Karvinen-Niinikoski (2009) observes that, given the crucial importance of risk management in agency development, social workers' reflections should encompass the workplace culture and means of risk management. In order to cope most effectively with mistakes, social workers' reflections should be both personal and organizational.

Reflection is a structured, disciplined, and rigorous way to link knowledge to practice, whereas mistakes are often an uncomfortable impetus for reflection (Sicora, 2017, 2018). Theoretically, social workers' analyses of mistakes, and their refinement of coping mechanisms in the aftermath of mistakes, will strengthen their decision-making and reflective thinking skills. Empirical research, however, is urgently needed to further examine the nature and limitations of frontline social workers' reflections on their mistakes.

Data and Methods

Participants

We employed the narrative inquiry approach (Hickson, 2016) to interview fifteen Chinese social workers practicing in Guangzhou. Guangzhou is a leading city in reform and opening up, and has been at the forefront of social service provision and social work development in Mainland China. As of 2016, Guangzhou had 417 registered social work service institutions and the government's investment in social work services reached 330 million yuan (Guangzhou Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau, 2016). Many social workers throughout China are eager to find jobs in Guangzhou. Our study thus well represents the vanguard of social work development in Mainland China.

To ensure that our study sample reflected the composition of the professional workforce in Guangzhou, we first purposely approached and recruited social workers from organizations providing a diversity of social work services, particularly children and youth, health, community, and senior services, which are on the top of government contract-out service list (Guangzhou Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau, 2016). We further established our sample to reflect the demographic composition of the workforce. According to Lu and Cai (2018), women constitute the majority (78 percent) of social workers in Guangzhou; the workforce are relatively young: the frontline social workers on average were 26.52 years old and the average work experience was only 2.14 years. To avoid only having participants with limited work experience, we also distinguished the social workers' work experience and professional backgrounds, and recruited participants employed as social workers, social work supervisors, or social work service managers, whose work experience in their current organization ranged from two months to more than 10 years. Detailed information about the study was disseminated to all potential participants. Written consent was obtained from those

who agreed to participate before the commencement of the interview. Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' home institute. Where extracts from individual interviews are cited in this article, all means of identifying participants have been withheld.

Table 1 outlines research participants' key characteristics. Six were male and nine were female, with an average age of 27 years. Most participants had worked for less than 10 years in their current organization. Although participants were carefully selected to reflect the age, gender, professional background, work experience, and service area profile of the professional workforce in Guangzhou, the relatively small sample size may still not adequately constitute a representative sample of the profession; thus caution needs to be employed in making any generalization from our study.

Table 1. Key characteristics of research participants

Participant No.	Gender	Age	Professional background	Years in the organization	Service areas of the organization
SW1	Female	35	Social worker/ service manager	12	Integrated service*
SW2	Female	25	Social worker	5	Administration and policy development
SW3	Female	20	Social worker	2 months	Integrated service*
SW4	Female	28	Social worker	7	Community service
SW5	Male	26	Social worker	5	Integrated service*
SW6	Female	24	Social worker	4	Disability service
SW7	Male	24	Social worker/ supervisor	3.5	Teenager counselling
SW8	Female	26	Social worker/ service manager	8	Hospital

SW9	Female	25	Social worker	5	Hospital
SW10	Female	22	Social worker	1	Family service
SW11	Male	38	Social worker/ supervisor	12	Mental health
SW12	Male	23	Social worker	2	Residential elder care
SW13	Female	28	Social worker/ supervisor	8	Family service
SW14	Male	31	Social worker/ service manager	11	Child welfare
SW15	Male	33	Social worker/ supervisor	12	Integrated service*

*Integrated service is provided by Integrated Family Service Centers (IFSCs), covering all sub-districts of Guangzhou city. In addition to professional social work services targeting individuals and families, IFSCs are actively involved in culture promotion, civic education, policy advocacy, emergency response, and other community services (Guangzhou Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau, 2016).

Procedure

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, the structure of which followed the process of reflective learning in a framework based on Gibbs' (1988) theory of reflective learning circle. The interview questions were developed from Sicora's (2010) study in Italy and other related research (Lister and Crisp, 2007; Taylor, 2010). The reflective interview started with participants establishing a definition of mistakes and then sharing their narrative of a mistake. They were then asked to provide feedback on the stages associated with a mistake: sharing feelings, self-assessment, self-analysis, and action plan. Open question-based techniques were employed during the reflective interview.

All interviews were conducted by a single research assistant under the direct supervision of the first author in August 2018. The interviews were conducted at the participants' workplace so that the interviewer would have a better understanding of their

daily work experience and environment. Each interview was of 60-90 minutes' duration. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Interviews were conducted in Chinese (Putonghua or Cantonese) and quotations from following transcripts were translated into English for the purpose of this article.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Analysis of social workers' stories provides insights into how they use reflection and make sense of the world through language, discourse, experiences, and perceptions (Yip, 2006). Anonymized transcripts were first read through by members of the research team. Relevant content was identified and categorized, and possible connections were noted. NVivo 10 software was used for coding and further analysis. A second reading of the transcripts was undertaken, encoding the content into more specific categories. Themes were then established based on repeated patterns in the data. The findings presented below reflect the major themes identified by the research team, corroborated by direct quotations from participant interviews.

Findings

Theme 1: Awareness—from "Never made a mistake" to "What is a mistake?"

Mistakes appeared to be a sensitive topic for participants. A number of participants admitted that the term "mistake" had only negative connotations of failure, and they tended to avoid the topic initially.

"Mistake" is a sensitive word associated with lower standards of professionalism

When asked, "Would you please describe one memorable mistake that occurred in practice?" most participants refused to answer the question. In reply, some asked, "Who decides what a mistake is?" This made us realize that social workers did not register mistakes because they were doubtful about who was judging the mistakes and the criteria for judgment. The negative associations of their mistakes may result in censure from their organization, service users, and policymakers, and even lead to public doubts about their professionalism:

> *They [i.e., service users] always complain. It does not matter whether or not your way of doing things is effective enough to help them.* (SW3, female social worker, age 20, two months in integrated services)

Social workers' unwillingness to admit mistakes indicated both their concern for the reputation of the profession and their anxiety about professional identity. As social work is still very new in Mainland China, negative experiences can further weaken social workers' already fragile professional identity (Liu et al., 2012). Participants refused to accept the applicability of "mistakes" or "failures" because these terms suggested their professionalism was being questioned.

Mistakes happen in the clinical service process.

Once assured that there would be no external judgment, participants became more responsive to our questions. They tried to identify the criteria for mistakes from their own experiences, which is a creative if unusual starting point of the reflection process. Their criteria for

mistakes can be divided into three main categories: mistakes in ethical reasoning preceding the practice, mistakes in application of knowledge during the practice, and mistakes that are evident in the result of the practice (see Table 2). Consistent with existing literature, these criteria indicate social workers' concern regarding intention, capacity, and outcome (Sicora, 2017, 2018). Of the three criteria, participants considered mistakes in application of knowledge to be the most prevalent, in contrast to Reamer (2008), who found that social workers' professional mistakes generally arise from incorrect ethical reasoning before implementation.

Table 2. Criteria of mistakes defined by participants

Issues	**Criteria**	**Example questions raised by participants during the interview**
Ethical reasoning before practice	Intention of the service design	Did the social worker have the wrong intention? (SW2)
Application of knowledge	Professional implementation of the process	Did the social worker apply the proper knowledge, skills, and experience in the service? (SW7)
Deviation in results	Occurrence of injurious service outcomes	Did the social worker hurt anyone? (SW14)

Theme 2: Attitude—it is normal to be incompetent

After identifying the types of mistakes, participants were more willing to talk about their own mistakes. They admitted that mistakes were common in their day-to-day work and they found relief in sharing their stories and reactions with us. The mistakes they described can be divided into three types: failure in a service outcome, mistaken ethical reasoning, and missed messages.

Failure in a service outcome due to bias in knowledge application

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More experienced social workers tended to talk about the implementation of their services with ease, but newer social workers focused more on their efforts in building relationships with service users and the failures they experienced in applying previous knowledge:

I definitely missed some important messages from his [the service user's] childhood. He kept complaining about his family. I then focused on rebuilding his family relationships. Later, I found that attachment theory better explained his needs: his unhappy childhood life made him indifferent to everyone in his family. When I asked to make a home visit, he insisted on ending the service. (SW10, female social worker, age 22, one year in family service)

Mistaken ethical reasoning in the professional relationship

Ethical issues are prevalent in generating mistakes in the professional relationship. There are questions as to whether the service user's self-determination should be limited, whether confidentiality is maintained, and whether personal relationships have a place in professional service. The ethics taught to Chinese social workers are based on Western principles and solutions, which they can find confusing. Taking social workers' ethical responsibilities to service users for example, the NASW code of ethics clearly demarcates the boundaries of social workers' professional roles in their relationships (NASW, 2017). However, local traditions embedded in Chinese culture hardly provide such clarity for social workers' professional relationships. Chinese social workers thus need to make their own judgement on how to maintain proper professional boundaries with service users. The mistakes described by some participants could be attributed to the lack of local ethical principles. They also felt

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obligated to show respect to service users' "face" ("mianzi" in Chinese), which refers to the respect that a person can claim from others. Developed in Confucian society as "the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated" (Lin, 1935, p. 200), the notion of "saving face" often hinders service users from sharing their real feelings and prevents social workers from revealing such feelings in front of others (Kim and Nam, 1998):

> *I failed to manage a supportive service group for youth development. I didn't know how to set up a relationship with a young person. They were not as active as I thought young people should be. So, I tried to discuss the feelings they had confided in me personally as a friend before the group session, which made it worse. They never showed up for the next sessions.* (SW7, male social worker/supervisor, age 24, 3.5 years in teenager counselling)

Missed messages due to too many tasks

A few participants believed that overwork resulted in mistakes. Under the mechanism of the government purchase of services, the completion of fixed-term contracts is crucial to social workers and agencies. Too many tasks within a limited time impel social workers to focus on outputs rather than outcomes. Social work practice can then become selective: easily contacted and more receptive service users are more likely to be chosen. It is not uncommon to "create" a problem for a particular group so that it can be "solved." Selective services legitimized social workers' actions. As one social worker who was also a service manager noted, "*After all, getting things done is the most important thing.*" (SW8, female social worker/service manager, age 26, 8 years in hospital service)

Theme 3: Assessment—mistakes can damage relationships

Our participants recognized both positive and negative outcomes from mistakes, but they tended to dwell more on the negative one. The damage created by a mistake was usually felt in the social worker's relationship with stakeholders, including service users, service purchasers, and service partners. Some participants noted that deterioration of these relationships could threaten their job:

> *For me, the greatest sense of achievement in social work comes from seeing service users. If something goes wrong with the professional relationship between me and my service users, I may not be able to hold on to this job for long.* (SW10, female social worker, age 22, 1 year in family service)

Others were more concerned about their relationship with stakeholders in the public service system. Social workers perceived themselves as victims of a system—when something does not work out, they are the first to be blamed:

> *When we hold joint conferences with multiple parties, it is difficult to accommodate everyone's interests. Someone's interest has to be compromised, and then everyone blames the social workers.* (SW2, female social worker, age 25, 5 years in administration and policy development)

Theme 4: Analysis—it is a matter of environment

Our participants considered that the mistakes they had identified as the result of lack of competence, insufficient experience, or overwork were actually consequences of the work environment. This belief allowed them to be more open in their description of mistakes and

self-assessment. They maintained that there was a "chain", and mistakes resulted from a "chain reaction." A mistake was often a consequence of earlier failures in the chain. They attributed their mistakes to poor professional education, inadequate management of their organization, and unrealistic expectations of the public.

First, social work education and practice are struggling to support each other. Weak curriculum design and insufficient indigenous awareness have led to a lack of competence before practice. The participants, in turn, showed little interest in capacity building and took no responsibility for the inadequacies in their service; instead, they felt the need to be provided with manual-based guidance:

> *There is no record of previous experience to draw upon in the services that I work in, such as youth services and social work services in schools. I can only rely on the four years of education that I received in college, which was very limited.* (SW1, female social worker/service manage, age 35, 12 years in integrated service)
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> *Although there are various theoretical approaches to professional intervention, how do they apply? As social work practice is still quite new in Chinese Mainland, anything might happen. We need guidance, and incompetence is inevitable.* (SW4, female social worker, age 28, 7 years in community service)

Meanwhile, social work organizations are proliferating without sufficient planning. Given the difficult tasks required by the public service system, problems are prone to occur when organizations are not prepared to meet the challenges. Social workers in these organizations quickly lose their confidence when their efforts lead to little progress:

An individual social worker is just a code. Without a well-designed program, there cannot be a result. It is so obvious! It is difficult for the current management to avoid such mistakes. (SW5, male social worker, age 26, 5 years in integrated service)

I treasure opportunities to prove myself as a project director. It's okay to have fewer people on the team. It's okay to do things first and make mistakes. After all, it is not easy to get the contract, the project period is short, and I have no idea what will happen next year. (SW14, male social worker/service manager, age 31, 11 years in child welfare)

Finally, the public also makes excessive demands on the social work profession. The role of social work has received a great deal of attention since the enactment of social governance reforms in Mainland China. A humanistic political discourse of "person-centredness" has accompanied the newly crafted government programmes, which have specified the important role of social work in fostering social cohesion (Leung et al., 2012). Social workers often feel they are caught between their professional affiliations and government demands and they are not given adequate tools to cope with these demands:

The government expects social work to be professional. It wants social work organizations to separate from the administrative system; but it does not allow these organizations to break away from government control and evolve into another social force. Even worse, the government expects us to solve social problems that cannot be solved by social work alone. Given these unrealistic expectations, any social worker will feel powerless. (SW13, female social worker/supervisor, age 28, 8 years in family service)

Theme 5: Action plan—change the world or myself

Social work is an agent of change through professional relationships, and reflection helps social workers to make progress. When asked about their action plans to cope with mistakes, most participants were perplexed. They tended to address the end of the "chain reaction" rather than the stages. Generally, they saw mistakes as a product of the nature of social workers, the profession, and the stakeholders:

I can do better, but the conflict is still there and the future is still vague. I do not know what I can change. Even if my competence improves, I still cannot do everything for the service user because of the lack of resources. He would think I am unprofessional. (SW12, male social worker, age 23, 2 years in residential care for the elderly)

Although I have been a social worker for more than ten years, I still get perplexed when talking to newcomers. Will the change in oneself help to change the negative impact we mentioned before? (SW1, female social worker/service manager, age 35, 12 years in integrated service)

As a highly institutionalized professional environment has yet to be established in Mainland China, service users have insufficient trust in social workers. A social worker must rely on interpersonal trust to establish a relationship. Unlike other human service professions who admit that they feel ashamed and will develop strategies to fix any damage done to service users or stakeholders (Reamer, 2008), social workers are confused and do not know how to proceed collaboratively when a mistake occurs. It is not surprising that social workers

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assume that any mistake made in their practice is too toxic to handle, relationship-related risks are always present, and nothing can be changed:

I am afraid of holding multi-party meetings for case management. I need to carefully consider the specifications of the government's administrative system, which is too difficult for social workers. (SW15, male social workers/supervisor, age 33, 12 years in integrated service)

Discussion

Based on reflective interviews with fifteen frontline social workers, social work supervisors, and service managers in Guangzhou China, this article investigates social workers' attitudes towards mistakes, the nature of their reflections, and the potentials and limitations of their reflective practices. During the reflective interviews, we encouraged participants to consider their internal conflicts in the broader context of the profession to search for an answer. Their concerns, complaints, and admissions during the reflection provided insights about the current position of social workers and their limited professional status in Mainland China.

Social workers are capable of reflection

In contrast to previous research (Liu et al, 2012; Lei and Huang, 2018), our study shows that social workers in Mainland China can respond positively to the need for reflection and the importance of understanding mistakes. Although our participants were reluctant to discuss their mistakes initially, the fact that they were willing to share their stories and feelings later demonstrated that our interview process encouraged a successful reflective experience. Self-

assessment and self-analysis allowed them to situate their personal conflicts in a broader social context. Their focus on mistakes in their practice indicated their clinical-oriented understanding of social work services. They were able to connect theory and practice; they also had the capacity to appreciate the ethical and political dimensions of their practice. Their ability to formulate criteria to define mistakes further suggests that social workers can confidently apply the fruits of their reflection to their day-to-day practice.

Social workers' reflection is critical

According to critical theorists including Habermas (1995), Freire (1978), Schön (1991), and Fook (2000, 2002), reflection can raise consciousness of biases and weaknesses that are hidden in accepted social habits, social structures, and educational practices. The social workers we interviewed, especially those service managers in charge of projects, were critical of the current level of professionalization that social work has achieved in Mainland China. They analyzed their mistakes as part of a chain of events arising from social work's precarious state of professionalization, which gave rise to concerns about professional identity, ethical dilemmas, indigenous knowledge, and service relationships. The concerns they identified concurred with the features of social work professionalization noted by Weiss-Gal and Welbourne (2008), including public recognition, professional autonomy, establishment of a knowledge system, professional education, clear professional access, and specialized and operational ethics codes.

Social workers feel ashamed about undertaking self-analysis but desire better skills

According to Taylor (2010), technical reflection uses the scientific method to produce new empirical knowledge that improves instrumental action. Chinese social workers interviewed in this study showed little interest in generating empirical knowledge; rather, they preferred to be provided with ready-made practice manuals. They desired better skills but appeared to feel ashamed about undertaking further self-analysis. Most participants attributed service failures to the lack of education and practice opportunities; they did not take the initiative to identify their own gaps in specific competences or improve their knowledge in those areas. Two reasons can be cited to explain the shame they felt.

The first explanation relates to the notion of "saving face" or "fear of losing face" (Kim and Nam, 1998). When Chinese people fail in something or make mistakes publicly, they are afraid of damaging their reputation, which would attract embarrassment and anxiety. Because of the concern of losing face, our participants tended to consider the causes of mistakes as "external" to themselves rather than "internal."

The second reason is rooted in professional demands. Unlike the evidence-based and reflective knowledge-building practices in the West (Avby, 2018), social work practice in Mainland China remains at an initial indigenous stage, which urgently needs standardized procedures to guide and improve practice (Shen and Wu, 2019). The Ministry of Civil Affairs (2018) has published several service standards, including the *Social Work Service Standards* (MZ/T 094-2017, MZ/T 095-2017) and series of guidebooks on fundamental social work methods. However, these mostly provide general rules or ethical guidelines, which are hard to operationalize. Due to the lack of systematic training for professional competence (Zhou et al., 2017), frontline social workers are often confused by the demands of their practice. They

consider that service manuals containing clear instructions could provide them with specific

knowledge, equip them with better skills, and help them navigate uncertainty in practice.

Reflection is limited because of the low level of professionalization

Social workers' hesitation to introduce any new actions following reflection is a result of the

limitations in their reflective practice. Practitioners may be aware of thinking, analyzing, and

reflecting on experiences but these activities do not lead to new understandings or solutions.

A strong sense of insecurity further led them to consider mistakes as an inevitable part of

service delivery, because the Chinese social work profession is still characterized by a limited

knowledge base, unclear professional orientation, and weak professional identity.

The professionalization of social work in Mainland China is controlled and regulated

by political bureaucracies (He and Chui, 2016). The restoration of social work as a result of

reform has combined aspects of the old administrative and the new professional systems; and

the government still fluctuates in its attitude towards social work. A large proportion of

licensed social workers who have passed the certificate examination are from the old

administrative units who continue to perform their original roles in delivering social

assistance (Shen and Wu, 2019). The new professional system mostly operates in social work

organizations, which depend on fixed-term government contracting services (normally one or

two years). High pressures experienced in the emerging social work field undermine social

workers' already fragile professional identity, resulting in high staff turnover and wastage of

talents (Liu et al, 2012). Social workers thus refuse to accept words like "mistake" or "failure"

because these terms question the professionalism of their work.

Implications for the Social Work Profession

The nature of social workers' reflections on their mistakes as documented in this article indicates not only the transitional feature of the profession's capacity building in Mainland China, but also the unique historic, political, and cultural contexts for its development. Our research recognizes that professional dialogue needs to be carried out among individual social workers, social work organizations, and social work associations and calls for systematic efforts to resolve the problems identified. In particular, social workers' ability to turn the fruits of their reflection into better practice could be addressed through improvements in the following three areas.

First, practitioners' reflective capacity could be improved if their education ensures their competence. The rapid expansion of social work in higher education in the 1990s and 2000s attracted many problems (Sigley, 2011); there is a lack of indigenous knowledge (Zhou et al., 2017) and social work teachers' expertise is sometimes questionable (Shen and Wu, 2019). A comprehensive indigenous competence system including both higher education and vocational training should be designed to cover the areas of confusion. The curriculum should provide guidance in ethical judgments, service techniques, establishment of public relations, and resource mobilization. Four core requirements should be covered: provision of information to the public; designing and delivering services; gathering, managing, and storing information; and social work education and supervision.

Second, the relationship-based risks that preoccupy frontline social workers could be managed systematically at the organizational level. Critical reflection is supposed to enable

professional agency, growth, and development (Fook and Gardner, 2007). Accordingly, social work organizations could be empowered, identify possible future pitfalls, and develop an all-round risk management strategy, which should "provide workers with a mechanism to identify the practical setting of relevant risks," "review and assess the sufficiency of its current practice," "design a practical strategy and modify current practices as needed," and "monitor the realization of this quality" (Reamer 2008, p. 179).

Finally, social work associations could be developed independently in order to promote professional standardization and provide more tangible support to frontline social workers. As representatives of the social work profession to the public, social work associations are expected to integrate resources and coordinate various public services. Associations could formulate professional norms and provide the public with a description of their services: such measures would improve the discipline and efficacy of social workers. In addition, social work associations could also act as supervisors to help the government manage its initiatives and even establish credible evaluations and disciplinary measures to combat fraudulent behaviour.

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