An interactive process model of knowledge transfer for social work through university–agency collaboration: Subjective experiences of the agency social workers in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This article reports on the outcome of an exploratory study on a university–agency collaboration in a Chinese context for transferring social work knowledge from academia to the field and beyond. A six-stage process characterised by interactive contributions from the university and the agency in question was identified from the trainees' narratives of the content, process and their subjective experiences with the three-year collaboration. The two parties co-constructed and adapted knowledge oriented for a specific clientele and agency context, and they implemented the intervention together with underlying theories and ways of thinking. Through interactive practising and coaching, knowledge was indigenised and disseminated into and beyond the agency. The study highlighted the trainees' active participation, the deep collaboration between the two parties and the trusting relationship within the changing power dynamics, and the comprehensive planning at the organisational level for a fully sustainable transfer of social work knowledge with tacit characteristics. Multiple implications for continuing professional education in social work are drawn.

Introduction

Developing evidence-based knowledge and transferring it to social service agencies and policy-making institutes are two missions of social work academia. Since the 1990s, social work has embraced evidence-based practice (EBP) (Cornish, 2017). This practice emphasises the 'conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best research evidence in making medical decisions about the care of individual patients' (cited in Bellamy *et al.*, 2013, p. 74). Scholars are expected to develop knowledge pertinent to social work practice; practitioners then choose appropriate interventions by determining 'what works' and 'how it can be implemented' on the basis of research evidence. In reality, more knowledge has been produced than can ever make an impact on practice, and even when it does, there is a huge time lag between the generation and the use of this knowledge (Gray and Schubert, 2012). Since the ultimate mission of social work research is to promote human well-being through policy and service provision, the issue of knowledge transfer (KT)—how to effectively and efficiently translate research findings into 'best practice'—is an important concern for social work scholars, educators and practitioners.

KT: An interactive process of building professional capacity

The literature on KT encompasses different disciplines (e.g. science and technology, business, education, social services). Classical approaches viewed knowledge as an object and the process as linear, with the user a passive receptacle of knowledge (Parent *et al.*, 2007). Other approaches acknowledge the interactive and process attributes of KT: the knowledge-sharing model, the knowledge-transformation process model, the integrated-process model (Liyanage *et al.*, 2009) and the dynamic KT capacity model (Parent *et al.*, 2007). In spite of different foci and theoretical foundations, these models do share: (1) social construction theory and systems thinking; (2) recognition of KT as an interactive two-way process; (3) involvement and benefits for both the sender and receiver; (4) an emphasis on the relevance to the context of the

knowledge to be used; and (5) building the receiver's capacity in a real-life setting (Thompson *et al.*, 2006; Gray and Schubert, 2012).

To achieve successful KT—(re)creation and application of knowledge in organisations—both the relevance of the knowledge and the process of its transformation are critical. Contextual factors that may influence the process and outcome include: (1) the source's willingness to share the knowledge; (2) the agency's needs and willingness to acquire the knowledge; (3) the existing knowledge and KT mechanism; and (4) the organisational structure, and the culture and atmosphere within and outside the agency (Parent *et al.*, 2007; Liyanage et al., 2009; Gray and Schubert, 2012). Involving the knowledge user in the process of knowledge production and transformation is thus necessary, as it may motivate the receiver to adopt new knowledge, narrow the gap between new and existing knowledge and make the KT process more relevant, effective and efficient (Rutter and Fisher, 2013).

Another inescapable issue of KT process is power dynamics, i.e. between the sender and the receiver, as the outcome of the KT process depends greatly on their relationship and interaction. In general, the sender is often valued more highly (as an 'expert' and 'source of knowledge') and thus has more power (McCabe *et al.*, 2016). This power disparity may be especially apparent and complicated in East Asian cultural context, where people tend to follow hierarchical and patriarchal rules in relationships (Bond, 1996). The complexity of the power dynamics would be further compounded by the differences in both the individual characteristics (i.e. gender, age, language, job rank) of the involved personnel and in the interpersonal, organisational or cultural rules between the sending and receiving end (Wang and Nicholas, 2005). Hong Kong, being a Chinese region preserving traditional 'Confucian heritage' on the one hand, teachers there are highly respected (Li and Du, 2013), and the importance of maintaining harmony in disagreement tend to characterise the KT process as being under the knowledge sender's dominance and/or the receiver's obedience and passivity in general (Leung, 2012; Wong, 2015). However, being a developed international metropolitan embracing cultural variety and westernised values on the other hand, the teacher–student hierarchy has been shrinking and Hong Kong adult learners are receptive to new learning models (Kennedy, 2002).

Being culturally sensitive to power dynamics is especially important when the knowledge to be transferred constitutes both explicit and tacit elements (Herie and Martin, 2002; Buckley *et al.*, 2010), as a hierarchical relationship may facilitate the efficiency of transferring explicit factual knowledge, but may hinder the transfer of knowledge with tacit relational and contextual characteristics. The attitude towards, and strategies for, addressing embedded power dynamics decisively influence whether or not the relationship and interaction will be trustworthy and inviting,

tolerant and encouraging towards input and adjustments to be made by both sides (Xia and Ma, 2020).

KT could occur at multiple levels, ranging from an individual's acquiring and applying new knowledge to an organisation's reform of its atmosphere and culture. Rutter and Fisher (2013) suggested that capacity building at the organisational level should be the superior goal of KT, as change and support in the larger system could enhance and sustain the acquirement and implementation of knowledge at the individual level (Bellamy *et al.*, 2013).

Transferring social work knowledge with tacit and social dimensions

The mainstream approaches to KT in social work take the form of college education with internships, and topic-specific training courses/workshops for continuous professional development. Such researcher/educator-dominant strategies are necessary and useful in providing basic knowledge (values, attitudes, theories and strategies) for students. However, they are insufficient either for building up students' professional readiness or for enhancing existing practitioners' competence in implementing new knowledge (i.e. intervention approaches, treatment models) at work, because of the embedded distance between academic knowledge and the complicated contextual reality of practice (Damron-Rodriguez, 2008; Yeremeyeva *et al.*, 2016), and because of the particular nature of social work knowledge as both a science and an art with an ethical and relational basis (Cornish, 2017).

This dual nature—and its roots in interpersonal relationships—makes social work expertise not only a matter of explicit theories and skills but also of tacit processes: making clinical judgements based on invisible values, beliefs and contextual factors. The explicitness of knowledge affects the mode of its transfer (Duguid, 2005; de Wit-de Vries *et al.*, 2019). Explicit knowledge can be transferred through prototypes, formulas or manuals, whilst tacit knowledge requires intensive interaction and more direct collaboration to develop competence (de Wit-de Vries *et al.*, 2019), and serious consideration of interpersonal and contextual factors (Duguid, 2005).

To overcome the insufficiency of traditional approaches in bridging the gap between academic knowledge and frontline practice, a collaborative model built on university–agency/researcher–practitioner partnerships has been promoted (Austin *et al.*, 1999; Taylor *et al.*, 2010). This collaborative model can facilitate the translation of research evidence into practice and build up practitioner capacity because of the deeper understanding of both the issue and the context of study/training, the

shared concerns and interests, and the intensive communication between the involved parties throughout the process (Taylor *et al.*, 2010).

However, few studies have demonstrated the interactive process of KT, and fewer of those are pertinent to social work. Existing studies are clustered around theoretical discussions of processes and key issues, outlining general factors that facilitate KT in social work (Rutter and Fisher, 2013). The limited examples have discursive foci or cover the process only in part, as is the situation in a case study of an agency–university collaborative think tank conducted by Austin *et al.* (1999), a study of transferring EBP model to social services agencies done by Bellamy *et al.* (2013), and a case illustration of using multiple channels to facilitate evidence-informed policy-making by Gabbay *et al.* (2020). These studies have proposed multiple useful strategies for KT for social work, but none have developed a complete process model for sustainable achievement.

Aiming to fill the knowledge gap, this study: (1) developed an interactive process model of KT for agency social workers in Hong Kong on the basis of a university–agency collaboration and with sustainable impacts and (2) revealed the subjective experiences of this process from the practitioner's perspective, so as to identify the mechanism and critical factors that influenced the process of KT.

Design of the study

This study was a sub-study of a three-year project conducted in Hong Kong with the major purpose of examining the efficacy of the multiple family group (MFG) in helping Chinese families with depressed parents. It was conducted collaboratively by a university-based research team and a team of experienced social workers from a community-based agency that has served people with mental-health needs for over fifty-five years and has been incorporating a family-based approach in service provision in recent years. The collaboration was initiated by the fourth author, who was inspired by the research team's (the first three authors) expertise in using the MFG to help Chinese families with mental health problems, with the hope of helping a specific clientele—families with depressed parent(s) in recovery. Sharing a similar vision and mission, the university research team adapted and evaluated the MFG for this clientele (Ma *et al.*, 2021) and transferred the adapted model, as well as ways of developing and delivering the model, to the agency. The fourth author then recruited nine social workers of the agency and formed a ten-member team for this project.

The two teams worked closely throughout the KT process. The research team proposed a tentative training outline comprising lectures, shadowing, coaching and supervision sessions on the theories and skills of the MFG at the beginning of the KT process. As the project evolved, the research team implemented and adjusted the plan with reference to the learning outcomes

and the agency team's feedback. As a result, a series of training and sharing activities were conducted, including a two-day training workshop at the beginning, model development and participant observation of the social workers in the pilot phase when the MFG model was adapted, and on-site coaching and video supervision in the second phase of the study.

This article focuses specifically on the KT aspect of the project, answering the following questions: (1) What was the process of KT, in the practice team's experience? (2) How did they experience the university–agency interaction and appraise its effects on KT?

A qualitative approach, intended to generate knowledge grounded in human experiences (Nowell *et al.*, 2017) and to provide an in-depth, socio-contextual and detailed description and interpretation of the research topic (Rubbin and Babbie, 2008), was adopted to explore the agency social worker's subjective experiences and appraisal of the collaborative KT process.

Participants

The participants in this study included all members of the agency team. The agency team consisted of ten experienced social workers: one supervisory and manager-level social worker (female, name code: SW-S; the fourth author), a team leader overseeing the project (male, name code: SW-L), two core members (both female, name codes: SW-C1, SW-C2) and six social workers (two men and four women; name codes: SW-1 to SW-6) (Figure 1). On average, they had thirteen years of professional experience and seven years of employment experience in this agency. They all had gone through the whole process of KT.

Data collection

The data used in this study included the track records of the project activities and narratives of the participants collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. A focus group interview is a suitable method for inquiring into people's experiences, views, opinions and attitudes connected to special issues in a group, having the merits of involving both group dynamics and a qualitative approach to produce good data quality (Hummelvoll, 2008). Two 100-min semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with the agency team, one in the middle and one at the completion of the project. Considering the potential power pressure that could be exerted by the group member with higher status (Hummelvoll, 2008; Leung, 2012), the supervisor was excluded from the focus group interviews and was interviewed individually instead to explore the project at the organisational level.
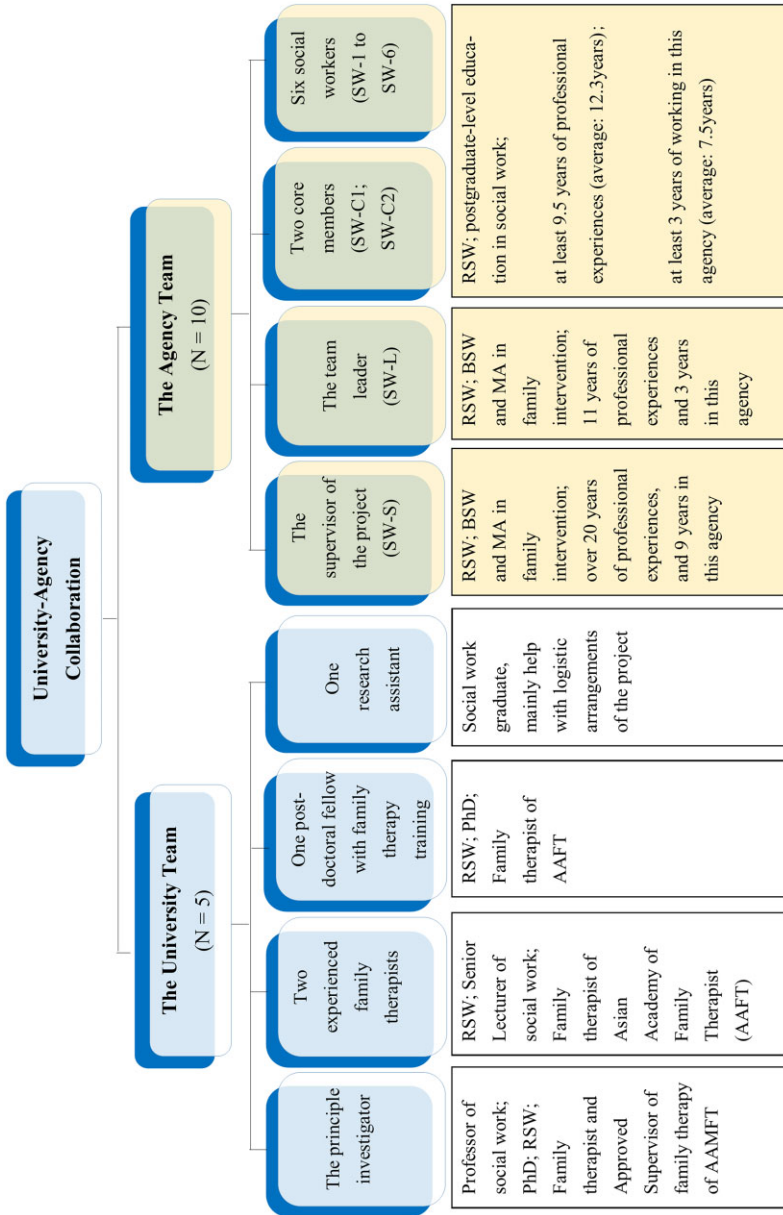
Figure 1: Team compositions and qualifications of the university–agency collaboration.

The first author conducted all the interviews and took notes of the process using an interview guide including: (1) How would you describe the journey of learning and practicing the MFG till now? (2) What were the challenges and milestones? (3) What did you do, and the research team do, to facilitate the learning/practicing of the MFG? (4) How would you appraise the relevance of the training/learning activities (mentioned above) to the purpose of KT? (5) How would you describe the relationship with the research team at different stages of the project? These questions were not discussed in a strict sequential order, nor were all the questions explicitly asked as sometimes the interaction flowed naturally from one topic to another (Ho, 2006). Each interview was recorded with informed consent and was transcribed verbatim for analysis. Name codes were used throughout the report for confidentiality. The study had received ethical approval from the Ethical Committee of The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Data analysis

A bottom-up type of thematic analysis that mainly focused on a sematic level of the narratives was adopted to derive themes and theoretical interpretations from the transcripts following the six-step procedure suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first author studied the transcripts repeatedly and developed a coding document incorporating emerging themes (e.g. stages of KT, key factors and impacts of KT), with reference to the track record of the project activities, the fieldnotes from the interviews and the multiple reflexive discussions with the second and the third author. To increase the trustworthiness, the transcripts and the coding framework were sent to the interviewees for review and comments. Based on the participants' feedback, the first three authors then refined the coding, identified connections and patterns between the themes as well as the underlying theoretical meaning and implications, and drafted the report. Because of the sematic level of thematic analysis and the homogeneous nature of the explored experiences in this study, we did not include detailed information of the conversation flow or interaction in extracts, but only quoted the bulk content itself, which represented the consensus of the group unless otherwise specified. Besides validating the transcript, the fourth author also contributed in proofreading the final report.

Results of the study

Whilst reviewing the series of project activities, the interviewees identified a six-stage process of KT (Figure 2) and appraised it as an evolving
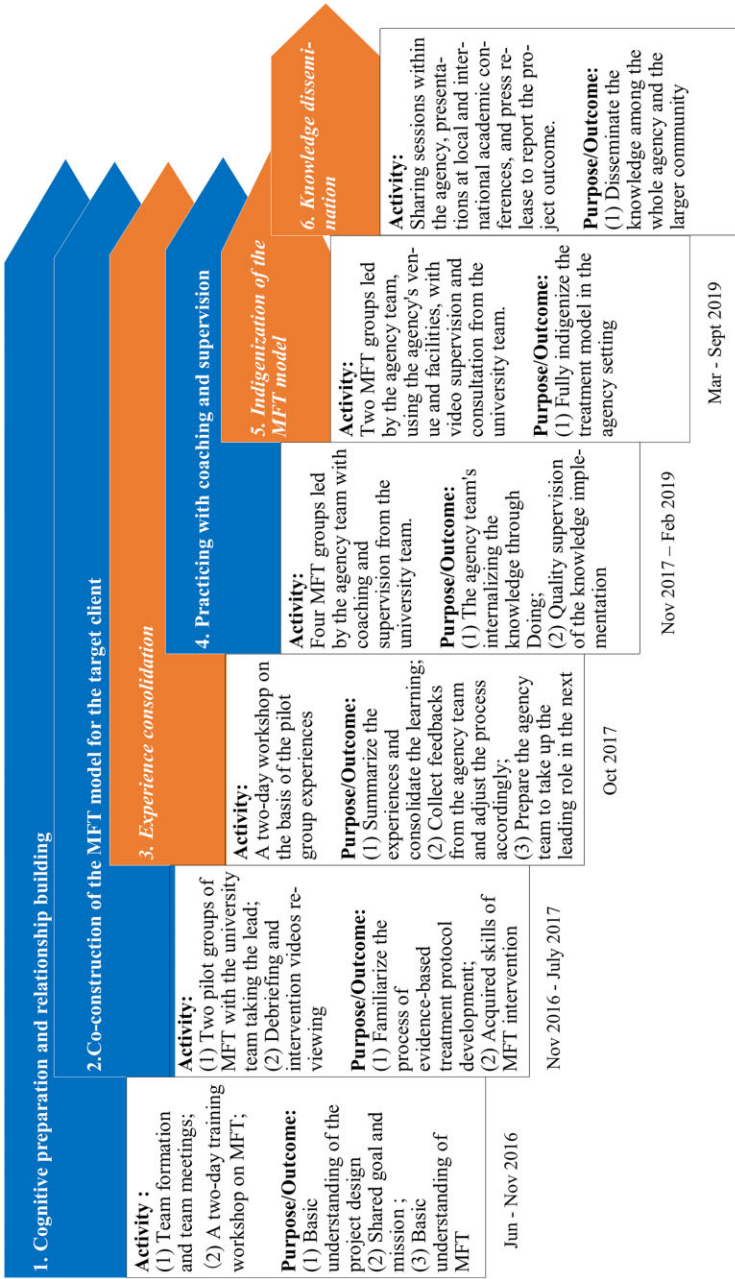
Figure 2: The six-stage process of knowledge transfer.

journey of interactive learning with different foci, tasks and subjective experiences at each stage.

Stage 1: Cognitive preparation and preliminary relationship building

The two-day training on the MFG at the outset marked the beginning of the learning journey, as 'it was the first time that they comprehensively learnt the theoretical foundation of an MFG and its application to helping Chinese families' (all interviewees). The workshop consisted of lectures and a half-day role-play session that not only helped the agency team build a basic theoretical understanding of the intervention model to be transferred, but also built an embodied experiential experience of MFG:

> It is necessary and good to have an intensive training at the beginning, as we didn't quite know what an MFG was, its theories, design, or intervention strategy. Besides, we need to experience it ourselves first and then we can feel the feeling of being treated with it and capture its spirit and keys in application (SW-3).

Such knowledge preparation narrowed the cognitive discrepancy between the two teams and provided common knowledge for later collaboration. The supervisory social worker (SW-S) highlighted the recruitment of trainees in the pre-stage of the KT process, as the 'common ground' included not only 'common knowledge' but also 'pre-existing common commitment and interest in family-centred intervention'. She recruited trainees from different service centres of the agency using the criteria of 'voluntary participation, interest in, and buying into the idea of a family-centred approach in mental health services and relevant experiences'.

At this stage, SW-S, as the supervisor, also built up the team through activities such as group outings, MFG study group, and case discussions. It was echoed by trainees' sharing that they developed 'boosted confidence' and 'team feeling' after 'a half-day in-house session to recapture the learning from the two-day training and to share their understanding of MFG' (SW-2) and after 'several outings with MFG-like casual activities to know each other better' (SW-C2).

Stage 2: Co-construction of the specific knowledge to be transferred

To reveal the therapeutic mechanism and develop a clientele-specific intervention model, two pilot MFGs were conducted. Each MFG (serving five to eight families) consisted of one psychoeducational talk, four

full-day group activities on four consecutive weekends, and two half-day reunions at one-month intervals (Figure 3). The research team took the lead and the agency workers participated as observers and assisting workers in planning and implementing the groups.

In retrospect, the trainees pointed out that 'the close collaboration between the two teams started from the very beginning of the project as we took part in organizing and delivering the psychoeducational talk and in encouraging and preparing service users of the agency to participate in the project' (SW-S). After each talk, a focus-group interview was conducted to engage with potential participants. The research team led the focus-group interview, whilst the agency team assisted in it and also in the pre-group interviews with eligible families. Then, a meeting was held to discuss and decide the group composition. In this meeting, the research team actively discussed their conceptualisation of the families with the agency team and the latter provided supplementary information about these families, with whom they had been working closely as case managers.

The trainees positively appraised the chance to attend these interviews and meetings, as they 'could learn more of each family's background and characteristics' (SW-5) and 'could observe how the theoretical perspectives and conceptual framework were implemented in each task and catch up with the leading team's understanding, thinking and planning of the group' (SW-L, SW-6, SW-S). In addition, such arrangements also helped the whole team to 'develop an agreed conceptualisation of the families' major issues and a common frame for group intervention' (SW-C1).

The typical working schedule of the day activities of the MFG included (1) preparing a session plan, (2) implementing group activities and (3) briefing team members (three times per day). The research team drafted a session plan, discussed the underlying rationale and the objectives of the activities with the whole team, and revised it accordingly. At the briefing session, the leading workers decided the general flow and division of labour for the day according to the session plan and the family updates provided by the agency team. Then the research team led the group activities, whilst the agency team members were assigned to facilitate family participation and observe family interactions. 'It is through this modelling, debriefing and giving instructions that the university team helped us to think, observe and act as MFG leaders', as SW-C2 put it.

The work meeting at noon served to collect the team's observations of the group and to choose an intervention focus for the afternoon. The debriefing session at the end of the day had additional functions of evaluating and reflecting on the process of KT and formulating follow-up plans for families with special issues. 'The briefing and debriefing sessions before, in-between, and at the end of the group activities were all
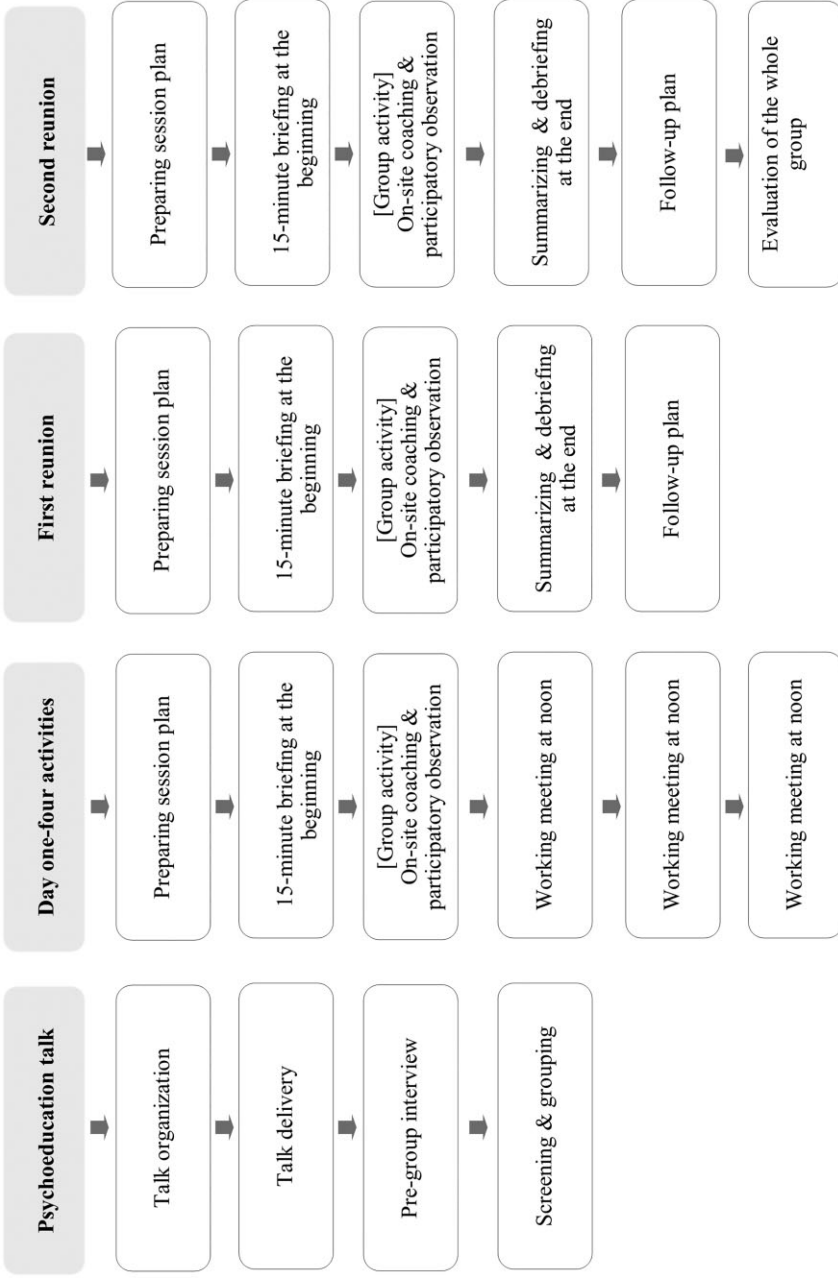
Figure 3: The general structure and process of each MFT group.

very important and were a good chance for learning,' said SW-4. SW-5 and SW-3 echoed this and highlighted the importance of continuous involvement throughout the process:

> I need to know how I should position myself in the teamwork, and the meetings help orient me for collaboration and help us to continuously examine whether the activities match our understanding of the needs of the families and the group objectives (SW-5).

> The team discussion was rich in perspectives, which supplemented and expanded my limited perception and experience of the group. Receiving feedback on your observation, conceptualization and planning is important, as you may have omitted some information, and we then know how to cooperate better with each other in the process (SW-3).

A clientele-specific intervention model was developed after the two pilot groups. At this stage, the agency team contributed to model development and 'learnt not only the working mechanism of the MFG but also what to observe, what to intervene in and why to do so' (SW-S), which is the development of EBP mindset.

Stage 3: Consolidation of knowledge and experience

A two-day workshop that 'revisited the MFG intervention model, reported the preliminary feedback of the families and consolidated the work experiences' (SW-S, SW-L) was requested by the trainees and was thus conducted at the agency immediately after the pilot phase. The content included: (1) a systemic-developmental perspective of depression; (2) the rationale of using an MFG as an alternative approach in helping this clientele; (3) the logic of programme design in the MFG; (4) multilayered interaction and the therapeutic process of the MFG; (5) off-site case coordination and follow-up as part of the MFG; and (6) mindfulness and teamwork in leading an MFG. Each part was illustrated with vignettes from the two pilot groups.

The training helped the agency team digest, review and consolidate the previous learning, and get prepared for the next stage—leading the MFG independently.

> The research team has taught us many practical intervention skills (over the group implementation process). The workshop systematically integrated those practices with theories and thus strengthened our sense of direction in practice. We then understood why we did this or that; we realized the underlying rationale, instead of just imitating or following the instructions. We became more confident and grounded in how to lead the group when we could articulate the reasoning (SW-L, SW-3).

As the process was interactive in nature, the university team invited the social workers to raise questions and share their experiences, which

'enriched the training content and enhanced the social workers' learning and sense of professional competence' (SW-S).

> Reviewing the group vignettes with the experts' lead was fruitful, and amazingly a sense of confidence and hope also came up...I also felt the university team's confidence in us. Though uncertain about what was going to happen, we did not feel so much pressure...while reviewing the video clips, my colleagues asked questions or shared their opinions, from which I witnessed their growing confidence, belief and strength, and I also felt we were more connected and belonged to the team. My belief in the power of the team and of the participating families also increased accordingly (SW-1).

To extend the circle of beneficiaries, participants in the workshop included not only the ten project workers, but also other interested social workers of the agency, which, in SW-S' words, 'created a more accepting environment for the MFG model to be transferred'.

Stage 4: Internalisation of the knowledge—Practicing with supervision

Four MFGs were carried out at this stage, with the agency team taking the lead and the research team stepping back into a supportive and supervisory role. The agency team organised the psychoeducational talk, conducted the pre-group interviews, designed session plans and decided on the group activities. The university team helped at the talk, participated in the discussion of each group's composition, and provided feedback on the session plans and the implementation. 'It usually took two to three revisions, through which we gradually mastered the principles of MFG group designing, to finalize a session plan,' as they recalled.

The research team took the role of participatory observers and provided on-site coaching and supervisory feedback for the implementation of the first two groups. As the agency team's experience and capacity increased, the university team gradually became less involved in the MFG and provided less guidance on group composition and planning for the latter two groups, and attended only half of the sessions for each group and observed behind the camera. A supervision session with the social workers was conducted at the end of each MFG to facilitate their discussion and reflection on the process, effects and difficulties of group implementation and to validate their positive experiences.

The social workers all felt 'excited and nervous' about applying the new knowledge to practice at this stage. The common metaphors that the social workers used to describe this experience were 'swimming learners practicing without life jackets' (SW-3), 'kite flying on a windless day' (SW-4) or 'practicing diving in a wild sea' (SW-6). The supervisor's (third author) on-site coaching and supervision provided timely practical

and psychological support, as she 'saved us when they found us losing direction or at an impasse' (SW-C1).

> She (3rd author) saved us when she found us in a difficult situation. She watched the group behind the camera. She asked us to go behind the camera one by one and directed us to watch what was happening in the group and to review our movements. Then, I knew what had been right or wrong with my previous actions and how to act next. She was sharp and could precisely capture our need for support, which helped. Otherwise we would feel like we were being thrown into the sea and drowning (SW-C1, SW-2).

Through the process of 'learning by doing', the agency team internalised and mastered the intervention model of the MFG and integrated on their experiences from previous stages. The focus group interviewees mentioned and agreed on 'their developing and increasing sense of ownership of the group, the MFG knowledge and the practice experiences' (SW-C1, SW-2, SW-3), which was also echoed in the interview with SW-S.

Stage 5: Indigenising the knowledge—The final step of KT

The two pilot MFG and the four MFG at stage 4 were carried out at the university team's venue. Therefore, a final step was needed to transmit the learnt knowledge and experiences to the agency that is a step to indigenise the knowledge into the service setting. For this purpose, another two groups were carried out by the agency team at its service centres. It was a process of contextualising 'foreign practices' into the facilities, community environment and limits and advantages of the agency, with 'the ultimate goal of planting the roots of the MFG model and ideology in the agency and making it part of the agency's routine services' (SW-S).

At this stage, the agency team had full autonomy in preparing, designing and implementing the groups, and the research team provided consultations on request. The agency team invited the university team to observe one or two sessions (of each group) to provide support, guidance and advice.

The workers 'became more relaxed, had more freedom and showed more creativity when working in a familiar setting' that they 'modified the group structure and injected some new elements with the use of the agency facilities and the community environment' (SW-L, SW-C1, SW-5). For example, they 'conducted joint lunches in the agency canteen, used the mindfulness centre for some sessions, and had outdoor activities in the community garden, all of which acquainted the participants with the service setting and connected them with the community' (SW-S). 'Probably because of better accessibility of the service and

enriched variety of the activities' (SW-C2, SW-6), participants in these two groups also reported relatively higher service satisfaction than those in other groups.

Step 6: Becoming knowledge disseminators—A step forward

The purpose of KT was achieved when the agency team received and grasped the MFG model, brought the 'outside knowledge' into the agency, and integrated it with routine services. The ten social workers became active carriers of the knowledge. They practiced it and organised two in-service training workshops to share their learning and project experiences. The interviewees revealed that they took the initiative to promote MFG theories and intervention skills learnt from the process because of the usefulness and effectiveness of such knowledge in handling daily work. In this sense, knowledge dissemination had become a self-enacting process at the end of the KT.

We disseminated the knowledge to a larger community through sharing the model and learning experiences at four local and interactional academic conferences, and releasing the research outcome through a press conference, media publications, and an intervention manual after the completion of the project. Though the research team initiated most of these 'academic activities', key members of the agency team were equally included in the tasks of preparing, presenting and writing. The social workers affirmed that 'the process helped us to review the learning and deepen their understanding of the MFG and evidence-based practice' (SW-L), and 'our sense of competence and confidence was further enhanced by positive feedback from the audience and the increasing interest in the MFG model from the field' (SW-C1, SW-C2).

At the completion of this project, the agency launched another large-scale service and training project to allow more people to benefit from the MFG model. Several other Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) with different service targets (i.e. children with special learning needs, families with handicapped children, youth with high functioning autism) also initiated collaboration with the research team, aiming to learn similar knowledge. The members of the agency team were also invited by many NGOs to share their experiences of MFG intervention, learning and agency–university collaboration, as SW-S revealed.

Summary: An interactively evolving journey

Though different metaphors (i.e. mountain climbing, river crossing, wine making, kite flying) were used in describing the process of learning the MFG, some common characteristics could be identified: 'interactive',

'experiential learning', 'exploring the unknown with support and increasing confidence', 'evolving and spiralling forward' and 'tolerance for different pacing'. As SW-2 and SW-6 described, it was like 'wading across the river by feeling the stones and following the experts' lead' as 'step by step, we acquired and tried out the new knowledge with them walking alongside and offering timely guidance'. The three stages of learning—theory learning, experiential learning as a participatory observer and practicing with coaching and supervision—were metaphorised as 'a boat on shore, in still pools and rough seas' by SW-C2 and SW-4. SW-S compared the whole process to 'the caterpillar growing and breaking out of the cocoon as a butterfly'.

> It felt like "starting from scratch" when we launched this project, as I had never heard about the MFG before……We were quite dependent on the research team in the embryo period, and we relied on them to incubate a basic concept of MFG knowledge. Then the embryo turned into a caterpillar, grew into a mature cocoon and then became a butterfly. We tried out the knowledge on our own, like butterflies flying out to collect pollen. Each group created some new experience and reflection. We digested and integrated them and moved forward with the accumulated learning. In so doing, the knowledge grew and expanded (SW-S).

The journey to successful KT involved intensive interaction and close collaboration between the two teams, with steps 1, 2 and 4 as originally outlined, whilst steps 3, 5 and 6 emerged in response to the social workers' learning needs. Notably, the KT process was a spiralling one, with ups and downs at each stage, and each step built upon and carried forward the content of the previous steps.

Discussion

This is the first empirical study which explores the detailed process and mechanism of the transfer of social work knowledge in Hong Kong. Theoretically, it embodies and expands the existing literature of the KT process from following aspects.

First, in line with the studies that emphasised the important role of the receiving end of KT (Parent *et al.*, 2007), our study challenges the traditional trainer-dominant process model and validates that continuously involving the receivers throughout the whole process is vital for successful and sustainable KT from academia to the practitioner. It revealed that, in addition to contributing to formulating research questions or providing data regarding the application context (de Wit-de Vries *et al.*, 2019), the knowledge receivers' commitment and self-interest in the knowledge, their working experience with the target clientele and their knowledge of the context, as well as the agency's

contextual characteristics themselves, are invaluable for developing and transferring the clientele-specific and context-relevant intervention model.

Secondly, the six-stage process expands the closed-end process models that usually marked the completion of KT with the absorption the knowledge at the receiver end (Liyanage *et al.*, 2009; de Wit-de Vries *et al.*, 2019), by adding the final two stages that facilitate the knowledge receiver to develop contextualised knowledge and to grow into the role of knowledge disseminators in new cycles of KT. It embraces a broader systemic thinking that accentuates the receiver end's capacity of knowledge generation and dissemination. Parent *et al.* (2007) suggested adaptive capacity and disseminative capacity as two essential elements of KT in the dynamic KT capacity model but did not develop a process or illustrate how to achieve them. In this sense, this study has not only added an empirical evidence to the systemic thinking of the KT process but also has embodied the generic capacity building model with a stage-specific evolving process.

Thirdly, the interactive collaboration between the university team and the agency team in this study both confirms and challenges the conventional understanding of the power disparity and its influence embedded in the teacher/expert and student/trainee dyad in East-Asian culture. At the beginning, the research team was at the higher end of the power structure and thus took the lead through organising the collaboration and propelling the project development and the agency team followed, which is a positive exercise of power as expected in the cultural context (Leung, 2012). However, the power disparity changed as the collaboration evolved. The conventional hierarchical relationship became a more equalitarian one, with the trainees' increasing share of the power and having a dominant say at the end, indicating that Chinese adults are receptive to learning modes different from the old hierarchical passive ones deployed in childhood (Kennedy, 2002). Because of the embedded power disparity at the outset, the research team's strategic sharing of power with the agency team is empowering to the agency team for encouraging and affirming their professional growth.

Other factors such as gender, language differences and cultural backgrounds between the knowledge sender and receiver that usually influence the power dynamics and the process of transnational KT in business were not evident in this study. It is probably because of (1) the same language and cultural backgrounds between the knowledge sender and receiver, (2) the already indigenisation of the knowledge to be transferred (Ma *et al.*, 2021) and (3) the relatively equal status between men and women professionals in Hong Kong, especially in social work profession with a dominant female manpower (Female/Male = 7:3) (Social Workers Registration Board, 2021).

In addition to the theoretical extension to the general KT literature, this study specifically fills the knowledge gap in and generating inspirations for the practice of social work KT in a Chinese context.

First, it identifies a multi-faceted process model for operating social work KT step by step, which not only acknowledges the dual nature of social work practice being both a science and an art with a relational basis (Cornish, 2017), but also cements the idea of directly modelling the use of evidence-based knowledge in service settings (Herie and Martin, 2002; Gray and Schubert, 2012). In accordance with Duguid's (2005) definition of the 'knowledge of doing', social work knowledge has a *doing* nature and an *experiential aspect*. As the agency team reported, aside from understanding explicit theories and skills, the core and also the most difficult part of learning the MFG model was acquiring a way of thinking of and formulating process-based judgements and actions, whilst considering both theories and the here-and-now context—both 'know-*how*' and 'know-*about*', which could not be taught through lectures only (Kennedy, 2002). The series of interactive demonstrations and the stage-specific support and guided practice over time demonstrated in this study were found to be useful.

As for the embedded power disparity between the knowledge sender and receiver in a Chinese context, addressing it consciously is a prerequisite to avoid potential negative impacts of the power dynamics (Buckley *et al.*, 2010). The university team, with higher status conventionally endowed, should acknowledge the power difference and make a concerted effort to develop a trusting university–agency partnership that empowers practitioners' contributions. Some of the strategies that the social workers saw as empowering in this study included valuing their practical experiences, involving them in constructing knowledge and the KT process, and facilitating their professional growth from trainees to trainers.

Echoing the limited literature on the organisational effort to establish KT (Gray and Schubert, 2012), this study points out the importance of having a comprehensive planning at the individual, interpersonal and organisational levels in order to achieve successful and sustainable KT. It suggests that the individual and collaborative process ensured the individual workers' knowledge acquisition, whilst the organisational level plan created an encouraging environment for the achievement of individual learning, consolidated it, facilitated a service paradigm shift at the organisational level, and extended the effects beyond the agency. The organisational strategies that facilitate smooth KT and that sustain the achievement, included staffing arrangements, in-service team building, substantial support for their using and sharing the knowledge and continuously expanding the beneficiaries of the service model.

Limitations

This is a case study. Readers should be aware of its limitations and cautious regarding generalising the results of our study to other social services or other settings of KT. A larger scale study that examines the model across different social service settings (i.e. family and child services, elderly services and health care services) should be carried out in future. This study only investigated the receiving end of KT as informants, which renders it impossible to provide a full picture and appraisal of the whole KT process. The dual roles of the interviewer—being one informants of the study and a member of the research team, may also have affected the interviewee's responses because of a 'tendency to give face' to the experts (Buckley *et al.*, 2010). Future studies could include both the knowledge senders and receivers as informants, or employ a third party to conduct the interviews or adopt an action-research design that includes the practitioners in the research team, to get a more comprehensive and valid revelation of the process. An assessment of the efficacy of each step of the KT could be added in future studies. Follow-up interviews should be conducted to examine the sustainability of the knowledge transferred as well as the relevant influential factors and mechanisms.

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