IMPACTS OF SARS CRISIS ON SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS — REFLECTION ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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Abstract: The impacts of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) on the social work students were examined using a combined quantitative and qualitative method. A survey was conducted with 114 social work undergraduate students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong to assess their perception of the impacts of SARS on them at personal and professional level. Four focus groups had been conducted to examine the social work students' interpretation and their reflection of their experience. Results show that the SARS crisis has positive impacts on social work students. The findings indicate that students with direct exposure to SARS perceived themselves as becoming more appreciative in attitude and have greater involvement and devotion to the social work profession. Moreover, the result shows that three variables — recognition of risk, commitment and devotion, and professional reflection are positively correlated. The findings articulate the relationship between experience (risk), profession reflection and meaning generation (commitment and devotion). The findings of this study provide us with insights to rethink on our social work education.

Keywords: SARS; Social Work Education; Risk; Reflection.

Introduction

Hardly ever has the society of Hong Kong been so devastated and demoralised as when the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic struck the territory in the spring of 2003. Faced with the novelty and speedy spread of the virus that hit 1,755 individuals and claimed the lives of nearly 300, the existing response system has proved to be inadequate in managing the disaster. Hong Kong people came under great pressure from the threat of SARS. There was a feeling of panic abroad while the threat lasted.

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During this period, the second and final year social work students of the Chinese University of Hong Kong were undertaking their field placements in various social welfare and medical settings. The outbreak of this unprecedented community wide crisis had a major impact on them. It even led to the suspension or rearrangement of some placements. The conflicts and challenges occasioned by the crisis included issues of student versus staff role, personal safety versus professional responsibility, as well as other psychological and emotional impacts. As social work educators, we, together with our students, would like to make use of this experience to rethink the role of social work education. It is hoped that, starting from rethinking the role of a student social worker, the meaning of professionalism, the existential death and value issues, we can re-examine and gain insight to improve our social work curriculum and social work education.

We will begin our rethink with a review of the different phases of the SARS crisis in Hong Kong; we will then examine the reaction of social work students and colleagues at the Chinese University; to the data we have collected from a survey and four qualitative focus group interviews; finally, we will set forth our insights and reflections.

The Context: Different Phases of the SARS Crisis in Hong Kong

The SARS crisis started with an outbreak of the epidemic in the Prince of Wales Hospital (PWH) in early March 2003, when a virtually unknown virus infected many doctors, nurses and medical students. Worries and anxieties built up in the Hong Kong community as the number of infected cases grew. The absence of knowledge about the virus, coupled with the speed of its spread, created a crisis atmosphere that was unprecedented in Hong Kong. Knowledge about the new epidemic was so imperfect that the nature of the virus, the symptoms of infection, the route of transmission and the appropriate treatment, took the community into uncharted waters and became the subject of recurrent controversy. The solutions and answers to the questions generated came step by step and in an apparently random manner. Whether facemasks should be worn in public places was one of the big questions when the threat was initially detected, but this particular argument was short lived. The threat was clearly recognised and this was reflected in the citizens' hunt for facemasks shortly after the onset of the epidemic.

At this time, social work undergraduate students were doing their field practicum at the medical social service unit of the Prince Wales Hospital, as well as other hospitals. Being placed in a "dangerous" environment, the students' worries and anxieties grew after they started in the placement unit on the week of 10 March. Their anxiety levels reached a peak after their placement day on 13 March. The feeling of anxiety spread among classmates and there were recriminations directed

against the Social Work Department even though the placement at PWH was suspended on 17 March. The Department also announced that student placements would be temporarily suspended in any field unit in which there were known infected cases. Several placement settings were affected by this decision, including the placement at the home for the elderly.

Following the detection of the threat and a series of public warnings, the community of Hong Kong reluctantly acknowledged that the customary ways of coping with public health problems did not work any more. For the first time since World War II, emergency medical services were temporarily suspended in PWH on 19 March 2003 and subsequently in other infected hospitals as well. The communal hazard also threatened normal daily routines in Hong Kong. Witnessing the steep rise in infected cases, the Hong Kong Government announced, on 27 March 2003, the suspension of classes in all schools below tertiary level. University authorities followed suit, and activity in all educational institutions virtually came to a halt. Following the suspension of classes by the universities, the Social Work Department announced suspension of all student placements.

From 17 March to the announcement of the suspension of placements on 28 March 2003, there were heated debates on the role of "student workers" among colleagues and students. Questions such as, "When all of our social work colleagues in the field are working, why should our placements be suspended?", "Is a student worker also a social worker?", "While we keep emphasising that student workers should adhere to the agency's administrative requirements, is it appropriate to suspend placements?", "Is it appropriate to 'chicken out' at the time when our clients are most in need?", "Is this an ethical decision?" All these questions reflect the concerns of our colleagues and students arising from our experiences of the crisis.

During this time, the number of contracted cases experienced a steep rise. The highest number of new infections in a single day during the period was 81. Given the high number of new cases, a sense of risk built up quickly in the community of Hong Kong. This sense of risk was manifested among consumers when, on 1 April, April Fools' Day, there was a rush to the supermarkets to stock up, following a rumour spread by a 14-year-old lad over the Internet to the effect that the border was about to be closed.

In the face of an invisible and unknown virus hiding in the community, the customary values of trust and courtesy came under challenge. Government promotional clips on television urged the citizens of Hong Kong not to use their hands to touch their own eyes, nose and mouth, and to always wash their hands before touching any part of their face. As carriers of the virus might not present symptoms, people were advised to keep others at a distance. Ostensibly, SARS

had emerged as more than a public health hazard. It was a challenge to the customary life of the people.

This period, from late March to mid April, was when the impact of the disaster was most intensely felt; not surprisingly, it was also the time when the students' resistance to resumption of their placements was at its highest. The students were worried about their personal safety and requested that sufficient protective facilities and measures (such as practice guidelines) be provided.

It was not until 12 April that infection figures began to display a steady downward trend. As the Hong Kong community began to absorb the reality of the epidemic, various sectors began to take measures to resume operations in the shadow of the threat from SARS. When classes resumed, educational institutions issued policy statements about wearing facemasks. During this period, non-governmental social service organisations initiated a number of contingent services for vulnerable groups to supplement the government's efforts. The community atmosphere became supportive and warm.

After the University announced the resumption of classes, the majority of social work students, except for those assigned to medical, school and residential settings, resumed their placements. In fact, social welfare agencies had already initiated a number of contingent services for vulnerable groups and our placement students had also been involved in this community-based support programmes. However, at this point, there were different views among students on the decision to resume placements. Some students welcomed the decision. They perceived that they had a role to play in the crisis. They were eager to resume their placements and regarded their placements as an opportunity to provide help and support to their clients. Other students had an ambivalent feeling and struggled to balance their professional role and the need to protect personal and family safety. In some cases, the feeling of fear was so overwhelming, that their family forbad them to have any contact with their "vulnerable" placement environment.

The SARS incident, with the accompanying uncertainty, ambiguity, mistrust and personal risk, posed profound challenges for our social work students. As social work educators, we intend to understand how the social work students handled these challenges and resolved the dilemmas involved. The aim of this study is to explore what these challenges tell us about professional social work principles, values and ethics, and then to critically appraise the merits and drawbacks of the current curriculum.

The Research Framework

The research framework of this study depends, firstly, on the assumption that social work service embraces much risk and ambiguity in dealing with the life

choices of individuals using the service. Decision need to be taken for which the instrumental reasoning used in the past is no longer a sufficient guide. The new complexity that social workers are confronted with arises from the increase in the numbers of decisions and choices open to people, which have to be undertaken "in the context of a heightened sense of how risky and consequential decisions are" (Ferguson, 2001, p. 46). In the growing scepticism about the possibility of identifying objective causes and about the availability of perfect knowledge on human behaviours, it is increasingly recognised that most of the human risks that social workers are expected to assess or manage "are not subject to scientific evaluation in any quantified or probabilistic sense", but are reliant on "artistic and situated judgment" (Parton, 1998, p. 23). Smith (2001) hence contends that social workers should "abandon the spurious expectation that they can predict conditions and outcomes of risk", and "embrace uncertainty and ambiguity and exploit the potential creativity" that uncertainty and ambiguity unleash (Smith, 2001, p. 290).

Secondly, the research framework is guided by our beliefs in the process of "reflection" or "reflective learning". According to Boyd and Fales (1983), reflection or reflective learning is a process of thinking about and exploring an issue of concern, which is triggered by an experience. The aim of this deliberation is to make sense or meaning out of the experience and to incorporate this experience into one's view of the self and the world. The exploration of an experience to create meaning (reflection) inevitably focuses on something of central importance to the individual where there is potential for significant learning and growth. This process, in turn, leads to increased self-awareness, increased sensitivity to the environment, and a change in conceptual perspective. Such a process not only improves critical thinking skills, but also contributes to growth in self-awareness, self-actualisation (Maslow, 1979) and the development of new knowledge (Boyd & Fales, 1983).

Boyd and Fales (1983) also distinguished six stages or aspects of the process of reflective learning: inner discomfort, identification of the concern, openness to new information, resolution, establishing continuity, and deciding whether to take action. The framework of reflective learning has been used in this study to identify the dynamics in the reflective process among social work students during the SARS crisis, for a further understanding of how past experiences are processed to generate new meanings. It is hoped that through this process, we can generate knowledge about the impacts of the SARS crisis on social work students and use our students' experience to provide us with a lens to view and review our social work curriculum.

Method

The purposive sampling method had been adopted for this study. Purposive sampling set out a setting where the processes being studied were most likely to occur and it seeks information-rich individuals to provide the details about personal meaning and experiences (Patton, 1990). The research participants were undergraduate social work students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. All students majoring in social work in the academic year 2002/2003 were invited to participate in the study.

The study consists of two parts. The first part is a quantitative data collection using a questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part is a 25-item scale, constructed by the researchers, measuring the respondent's perceived impacts of SARS in four aspects — the self, meaning of life, perceived social work values and principles, and perception of the social work profession. The second part of the questionnaire is the participant's profile, his/her placement setting and his/her exposure to the risk of SARS. This part is designed to collect information regarding the environmental impacts whilst contextualising the data. The questionnaire aims to measure the perceived change and perceived impact of SARS on social work students. The quantitative data were based on the responses of 114 social work students at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (total number of undergraduate student was 156, respondents comprised 73% of the total student population). This group comprises 48 first year students, 43 second year students and 23 third year students in the academic year 2002/2003.

The 25 items in the questionnaire were designed to measure social work students' perceptions of the impacts of SARS on them in different dimensions. A four-point scale (1 is strongly disagree, 2 is disagree, 3 is agree and 4 is strongly agree) was adopted. Five different subscales were constructed to assess the impact of SARS on social work students in different aspects:

1. *Assessment of Positive Life Attitude*
   The sub-scale on Positive Life Attitude (PLA) consisted of five items: item 1, "More reflection on meaning of life"; item 2, "More positive towards life"; item 3, "Treasure family relationship more"; item 4, "Treasure relationship with friends more" and item 8, "More appreciative to human nature". The sub-scale was found to be reliable in this study (with alpha = 0.714).
2. *Assessment of Negative Life Attitude*
   The sub-scale on Negative Life Attitude (NLA) consisted of three items: item 5, "More pessimistic towards life"; item 15, "Fatalistic view of life" and item 18, "Disappointed with myself". The scale was found to have adequate reliability in this study (with alpha = 0.636).

3. *Assessment of Commitment and Devotion*

   The sub-scale on Commitment and Devotion (CD) composed of three items: item 6, "More devoted to social work"; item 20, "More understanding of the helping beliefs of social work" and item 21, "More commitment to vision of social work profession". The sub-scale was found to be reliable in this study (with alpha = 0.738).

4. *Assessment of Professional Reflection*

   The sub-scale of Professional Reflection (PR) consisted of three items: item 7, "Reflect on my suitability for being a social worker", item 10, "More understanding of professional principles" and item 13, "Rethink social work code of ethics". The scale was found to be reliable in this study (with alpha = 0.687).

5. *Assessment of Risk Recognition*

   There were two items in this Risk Recognition (RR) sub-scale: item 10, "Understand the roles and responsibilities of social work profession in crisis" and item 15, "Understand risk involved in social work". The scale was found to be reliable in this study (with alpha = 0.477, inter-item correlation = 0.313).

The second part of the survey questionnaire was designed to gain an understanding of the students' exposure to SARS at the personal (with or without relatives or friends infected by SARS), communal (living in SARS outbreak community and with or without volunteer service experience in relation to SARS) and professional levels (with or without exposure to SARS at their placement setting) during the SARS crisis.

In addition to the survey, this study also used a qualitative method to examine the personal accounts of social work students experiencing the SARS crisis. Invitation was extended to all social work undergraduate students. Students participated in the focus group interviews on a voluntary basis. A total of four focus group interviews were held with a total of 23 research participants. Each focus group interview lasted for approximately one and a half to two and a half hours. Information was gathered on the participants' experiences during the SARS period, on the critical incidents encountered, on their perceptions of the impacts of the crisis and on their self-reflection. The interviews were tape-recorded and the narratives were fully transcribed by research assistants via Chinese word processing. The transcripts were then content analysed to reveal the themes in different areas. The procedures involving the qualitative data analyses were utilised (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Taylor & Bodgan, 1998). NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software was employed for data coding and data reduction. The three authors discussed the narratives and the related codes and interpretations of the qualitative data, to enhance the validity of the data.

Results

Part A — The Survey

Regarding the impacts of the SARS crisis on social work students, the study results reveal that the SARS crisis had a moderate and positive impact on our social work students. The mean score of item 25, "all in all, the SARS crisis has had great impact on me" is 2.69. This result reflects that the participants agreed that the SARS crisis had an impact on them. Furthermore, the participants perceived the impact as positive rather than negative (mean score for item 23, "overall, the impact of SARS on me as a social work student is positive", is 2.96; whereas the mean score for item 24, "overall, the impact of SARS on me as a social work student is negative", is only 1.96). The students revealed that the overall effect of SARS on them was positive rather than negative.

The mean score of the five items in the PLA (Positive Life Attitude) ranged from 2.86 to 3.28. The highest mean score was on item 8, "more appreciative toward human nature" (mean = 3.28). The second highest was on item 3, "treasure family relationship more" (mean = 3.17). The third highest was on item 1, "more refection on meaning of life" (mean = 3.14). The fourth highest was item 4, "treasure the relationship with friends more" (mean = 3.12). The lowest score was on item 2, "more positive towards life" (mean = 2.86). The total mean score on PLA was 3.11. This result indicates that social work students perceived that the SARS crisis had a positive impact on them. They perceived themselves as more positive in their life attitude after the crisis, and they attributed this change to the impact of SARS.

The CD scale (Commitment and Devotion) indicates that social work students perceived that they "understand better the helping beliefs of social work" (mean = 3.06); they had "more commitment to vision of social work profession" (mean = 2.88) and they became "more devoted to social work' (mean = 2.71).

The study results also indicate that the SARS crisis had a positive impact on students with regard to professional reflection. The result on the PR scale (Professional Reflection) items indicate that the students agreed that they had "reflected on my suitability for being a social worker" (mean = 2.51); they had "more understanding of the professional principles" (mean = 2.86); and they started to "rethink social work code of ethics" (mean = 2.63). The study results indicate that the crisis stimulated social work students to engage in professional reflection.

Another impact of SARS, according to the students, was that they recognised the risk involved in the social work profession. The results indicate that the students perceived that they became more "understanding of the roles and

responsibilities of social work profession in crisis' (mean=3.01) and they became more "understanding of risk involved in social work" (mean=2.91).

Comparing between students who had direct exposure to SARS with those students who had no direct exposure, the results indicated that students with family members or friends infected by SARS perceived more positive impacts than the group of students with no direct personal experience of SARS cases. For the direct exposure group, the mean score for the item on "more positive life attitude" was 3.48 while for the no direct exposure group; the mean score is 3.09 (F=7.60, p<0.01). Other item, such as "think about the meaning of life," the mean score for direct exposure group was 3.50 whereas the no exposure group was 3.11 (F=4.68, p<0.05). The item on "more positive on life" was 3.25 and 2.83 (F=5.54, p<0.05) and the item on "more value of family relationship" was 3.75 and 3.12 respectively (F=7.64, p<0.01). The results indicated significant difference between the exposure and non-exposure groups.

In summary, the study results indicate that the overall impact of SARS on social work students was positive. The most significant impact was at the personal level — the students became more positive in life attitude (mean = 3.11). Another significant impact was at the professional level — the students recognized the risk involved in the social work profession (mean = 2.96). They revealed that they became more devoted to social work (mean = 2.88). The SARS incident also induced "more reflection and understanding of social work profession" for students (mean = 2.66). Most of them disagreed that they were disappointed with the social work profession (mean = 1.93) or they became "more negative in life attitude" after the SARS crisis (mean = 2.19).
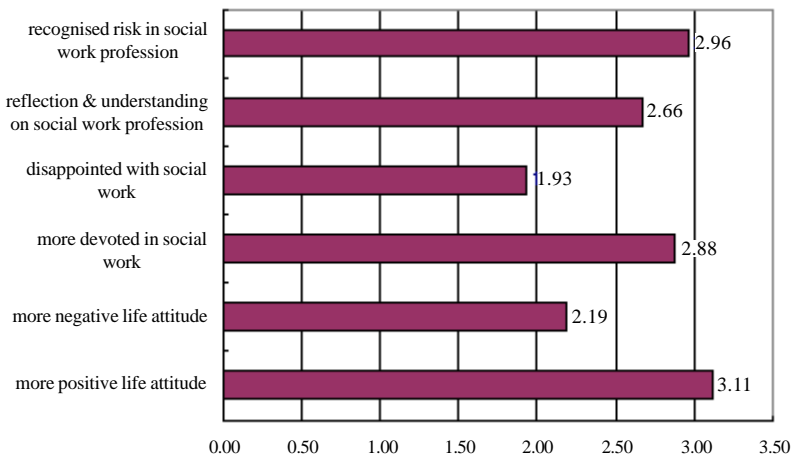

Figure 1. Summary of impacts of SARS on social work students.

Correlation coefficients on the linkage between positive impacts and different measures were conducted. The results indicate that item 23, "overall, the impact of SARS on me as a social work student is positive", was positively related to the CD scale (Commitment and Devotion) (R^2=0.434, p<0.01), the PR scale (Professional Reflection) (R^2=0.304, p<0.01), and RR (Risk Recognition) (R^2=0.306, p<0.01). The three scales on measuring the impacts of SARS at professional levels are also positively correlated. PR (Professional Reflection) was significantly related to RR (Risk Recognition) (R^2=0.628, p<0.001) and CSW (Commitment to Social Work) (R^2=0.579, p<0.001), whereas CSW was also significantly related to RR (R^2=0.519, p<0.001). The relationship between the variables is shown in Figure 2.
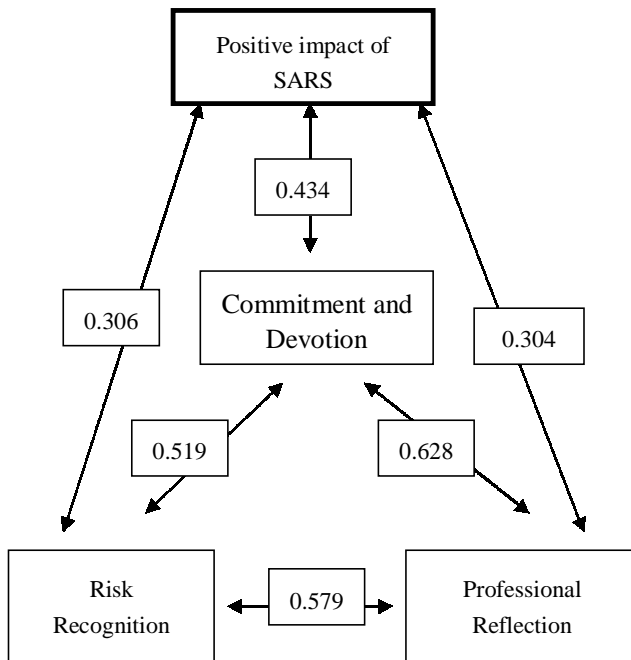

Figure 2. Correlations between items.

Part B — The Focus Group Interviews

Complementary to the survey, the focus groups supply qualitative data, which allows a more detailed understanding of how the social work students processed their experiences when confronted by the SARS risk during their fieldwork practicum. From the vast amount of information gathered in the interviews, the

present discussion will be on the students' perception on risk and their reflection on social work profession.

Regarding the students' perception on risk, in general, social work students participating in the focus groups could cognitively recognise the inevitability of risk in social work practice.

> "(Have you ever thought of a relationship between risk and social work?) Yes. Say, when I conduct a home visit, I would choose to sit or stand close to the exit. Considering the possibility of danger, I would inform my fieldmate before I go for a home visit. There is always a risk of personal harm in a home visit. But I have not thought of risk factors other than this before. Yes, there can be risk in social work practice..." (A Year two student)

The prevalence of risk in social work practice, however, is taken as a normative condition not much different from other occupations.

> "I don't think social work is a particularly risky profession. Many jobs have a certain element of danger. For example, the food and beverage industry." (A Year two student)

> "I think every job has risks — construction workers are an example." (Another Year two student)

Paradoxically, risk cognitively understood as a rule of life has diluted the reality of it. It is the SARS encounter that connects the cognitive recognition of risk to a genuinely personal experience.

> "SARS put things very close to you. I once visited an elderly client. He was bed-ridden. If I did not stay close to him, I could not possibly talk to him. But elderly people were a particularly high-risk group at that time. More than that, he was just out of hospital! I did have some hesitation. Even his wife washed herself all over (including her handbag) after a visit to this old man! I finally moved close to him and talked to him. Another client I encountered was a disabled girl. She was wet with tears and saliva when she cried. I wondered if I should pat her upon her crying. I also thought if I should wear a glove when I touch with her. But I felt that in so doing I would violate the very basic principle relating to human relationship, not just that of social work. At that moment, the risk is just so close and real." (A Year two student)

Yet, it is this personal sense of risk that engenders reflection on the role of social work and stimulates a rethinking of the students' personal commitment to the social work profession.

"When the risk is so close, your personal safety is at stake. Say, when a social worker brings a group of volunteers to clean up the residence of the elderly, there is surely risk in it. But if you don't do it, the deprived groups will be left unattended." (A Year two student)

"We were asked to discuss social work values in Year one. But it was a hypothetical discussion. But now you got such a life example... On the many old themes we have discussed before — when it comes to a matter of life and death — how can we keep up with all these values? We are confronted with life situations, not made-up cases, and not newspaper stuff." (A Year three student)

The narratives of the students reflected that, the dilemma between "fight" and "flight" when confronted by the real personal risk of SARS infection, engenders a reflection. The findings are consistent with the quantitative data that the SARS incidents, which involved risks and uncertainties, induced reflection on professionalism in social work.

Discussion

The first point worth noting is that the results of this study reveal that the SARS crisis had a positive impact on the social work students. At the personal level, they perceived that they have a more positive life attitude. At the professional level, while they recognise the risks involved in the social work profession, they have become more committed and devoted to social work values and have carried out more reflection on the social work profession. Although the crisis posed challenges for them, they disagreed that they are disappointed in the social work profession or that they have a more negative life attitude after the SARS crisis. The study findings indicate that, although the crisis triggered a sense of inner discomfort in the students at the beginning stage, as noted by Boyd and Fales (1983), it had positive impacts on them after they went through the resolution stage. The majority of the students have had positive learning experience from this crisis.

Second, the study results reveal that direct exposure to SARS is not a negative but a positive experience in terms of its impacts on life and professional attitude. Students who have family members or friends infected by SARS reveal that they have become more positive in life attitude (mean score is 3.48), and have better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the social work profession in a crisis (mean score is 3.5). Students placed in locations where there were infected SARS cases also stated that they became more appreciative of human nature (mean score is 3.50). The study results contrast with our conventional thinking that direct exposure to SARS (crisis) is a misfortune. Quite the opposite, the

experience tends to generate appreciative attitudes and greater involvement and devotion. The study results reveal that exposure to the ordeal can be a blessing in terms of personal and professional growth.

The present study shows that the dependent variable — positive impact of SARS, is positively associated with commitment and devotion, risk recognition and professional reflection. The three independent variables, commitment and devotion, risk recognition and professional reflection also have significant positive correlations (see Figure 2). Again, the result contrasts with our conventional idea that the recognition of risk in social work practice would have negative impacts on the students' attitude towards the social work profession. The results of this study do not support this idea. Indeed, the reverse is the truth. The results reveal that the more the students recognise the risk in the social work profession and to face the dilemma of "fight" and "flight", the more they reflect on the social work profession, and the higher their devotion and commitment to the profession. As reflected in the qualitative findings, the recognition of risk will enhance students' reflection, while the reflection and the rethinking process enhance their commitment. Furthermore, students who are reflective and devoted will be more likely to be aware of the risk involved in the profession, this will in turn engender more reflection and devotion to the social work profession and will result in positive impacts.

The preceding findings can be interpreted in terms of the theoretical framework of reflective learning (Sheppard & Ryan, 2003; Gould & Taylor, 1996). Reflection is a central element of social work training and is a significant element in the process of practitioner qualification (CCETSW, 1995; Yellodly & Henkel, 1995; Harrison, 1987). In the subject of social work, we believe that experience provides the basis for learning (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993; Boud & Miller, 1996). However, we also fully understand that experience does not automatically lead to learning. Learners might not be aware of the relationships between experiences, or might tend to undervalue the intrinsic value of their own experience. Sheppard *et al.* (2000) explain that, in order to have a positive impact from an experience (the risk of the SARS crisis) and to transform the experience into learning, one must go through a reflective process to "reframe" or "create meanings" for the experience and finally to develop "meaning for action" (commitment and devotion). During the SARS period, starting from the heated debates on the role of student social worker, to the "fight and flight" struggle, and finally to participating in contingent services for vulnerable groups, is a meaning generating process. The process helps to meaning out of experiences and transforming experiences into learning. The results of this study articulate the relationship between experience (risk), reflection, and meaning (commitment and devotion). The "reflection in

action" (Schon, 1991) and the reflective learning approach (Schon, 1983; Taylor, 1996) provide us with a framework to understand how experiences influence and enrich the growth of the professional self.

The study makes several educational and practical contributions. The result alerts us to the fact that social work training involves more than a development of knowledge. Although professional training gives students an important mandate for developing their competence in the knowledge and skills needed to prepare them for future leading roles in the field, it is also important to develop reflective social work students who then becoming reflective social work practitioners. In order to achieve the goal, a reflective climate must be provided for reflective learning. In our curriculum design, we need to develop appropriate ways to build notions of reflective practice into the process of teaching throughout all our courses, and to work out a coherent framework of learning that enables students to engage in activities that promote reflective learning. Furthermore, we need to analyse students' experiences in order to identify and categorise the range of their experiences, and to document and conceptualise how reflection takes place to contribute to an epistemology of practice.

Another striking reflection arising from the study is that in contemporary society, risks are unpredictable and unavoidable. However, under the influence of scientism, contemporary practice highlighting skills and working procedures reflects the dominant mentality of instrumental rationality, particularly under the threat of risk and uncertainty. Though the formalisation of procedures provides guidelines for practice, standardised procedures may reduce participation or hinder the development of a thorough understanding of risk. Where risks are unpredictable, it is particularly important that social workers adopt a reflective approach to their work. This involves embracing the inevitable risk, reflecting on their practice, drawing on new knowledge and procedures to develop new practice, and equipping the person with courage to face uncertainty and to shoulder responsibility. This is the notion of developing the "personhood" of the profession rather than solely focusing on "skills in occupation" in our professional training.

The result of this study reminds us that allowing students to have direct exposure to risk and uncertainty is not a negative but a positive experience in terms of impacts on life and professional attitude. The experience generates an appreciative attitude and greater involvement and devotion. The finding reinforces our beliefs in experiential learning and reminds us to trust the abilities of our students. As educators, although cognitively we agree that students have inherent abilities for problem solving and that the over-explicit, hand holding instruction of students is incompatible with our teaching philosophy, in practice we tend to over-teach and to be overprotective. The reflective paradigm and the study findings remind us that

we should trust that students have the ability to search for and obtain new knowledge, to explore questions in depth, to be critically aware and monitor their own learning. For learning to be more effective, the teachers and students should work together collaboratively with mutual trust, respect and commitment. Students are allowed to explore alternatives and to bear uncertainty, while teachers should have the courage to allow students to take risks and to make mistakes. During the experiential and risk taking process, students and teachers develop dialogues that produce experiences, attitudinal sets and alternative perspectives on their personal and professional world.

There are intrinsic limitations to this study. First, because the sample size is small, generalisability of the findings is limited. Second, the study was conducted in September 2003, a few months after the SARS crisis, the impacts of the crisis was still very strong because of the time factor. It is therefore recommended that this study be repeated at a later time to understand the persistence of the impacts on the participants. Third, the data were gathered solely from the social work students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, so that there is a need to examine this issue more widely from the standpoint of social work educators and to expand the research participants to include social work students of other training institutions.

Despite these limitations, the findings of the study are productive, particularly in the contributions they make to the study of the impacts of an experience and in identifying the dynamics in the reflective process among social work students during the SARS period. Further, the research and the focus group discussion process create a climate that facilitates reflection by the social work students who engage in the process as participants. The research process itself provides opportunities for students to explore, reflect and integrate their experiences.

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