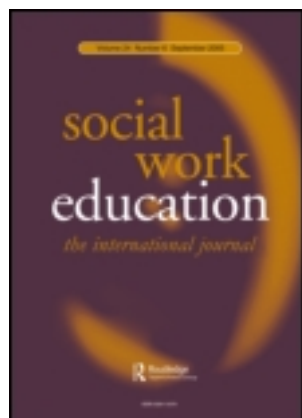


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Repositioning Risk in Social Work Education: Reflections Arising from the Threat of SARS to Social Work Students in Hong Kong during their Field Practicum

Terry Tse Fong Leung, Ching Man Lam & Hung Wong

The social work profession has always been involved in dealing with uncertainty and risk in the life politics of clients. However, it is not easy for young social work students to translate this philosophical disposition into their real life practice with clients. In spring 2003, when the SARS epidemic broke out in Hong Kong, a group of social work students from the Chinese University of Hong Kong were doing their fieldwork practicum. Suddenly confronted by a collective sense of risk in their role as social workers, the students went through a period of unrest, as performing their helping duties brought with it a simultaneous exposure to personal risk. This paper is based on four focus group interviews with these social work students, to understand how they processed their experience of risk during their exposure to the SARS crisis, and how they connected the experience to their social work practice with clients. It is found that the predicament arising from the exposure to personal risk brought about by the SARS crisis during the students' field placement engendered the reflective process that enabled a renewed and personalized meaning of professionalism. The results provide a basis for reflection among social work educators on the role of risk in the training of prospective social workers, and on how social work education can better prepare students for practice in a high-risk environment.

Keywords: Risk; Reflection; Social Work Education

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Introduction

It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us. (Dickens, 1898)

The people of Hong Kong have never had such a stark and close confrontation with risk as when the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic struck the territory in the spring of 2003. It started with an outbreak of the epidemic in a district hospital in early March, 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. So imperfect was the state of knowledge about the new epidemic, about the nature of the virus, the symptoms of infection, the route of transmission, and the appropriate treatment, that the community immediately found itself in uncharted waters.

Following 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 the infected hospitals. Witnessing the steep rise in infected cases, the Hong Kong Government announced the suspension of classes in all schools below tertiary level. University authorities followed suit, and activity in all educational institutions was virtually brought to a halt. The Government's decision to suspend classes in all schools was related to the outbreak of a large-scale community infection in the residential area of Amoy Gardens, in which coincidental environmental factors caused the infection of hundreds of residents in a small residential community. The Amoy Gardens infection, which eventually accounted for more than 40 deaths, prompted the introduction of quarantine measures for the family members of infected patients. 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 trust their hands to touch their own eyes, nose and mouth, and to wash their hands always 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. Shaking hands, a normal expression of courtesy in social life, was discouraged. In the shadow of SARS, social life in Hong Kong was virtually brought to a temporary halt, when people were asked to avoid public places and close encounters with other people.

During this period, the second and final year social work students at the Chinese University of Hong Kong were undertaking their field placements in various social welfare and medical settings. In view of the risk, the Social Work Department suspended or re-arranged some of the placements, but this did little to diminish the impact of the SARS crisis on the social work students. Suddenly confronted by a collective sense of risk in their role as social workers, the students went through a period of unrest in which performing their helping duties brought with it exposure to

the personal risk of viral infection. The crisis occasioned heated discussions among the students on issues of student versus staff roles, and personal safety versus professional responsibility.

The outbreak of this unprecedented community-wide crisis and the climate of uncertainty and risk that it created, has engendered much psychological and emotional upheaval among the students. As social work educators, we see this unprecedented collective experience among the students as a significant event in the ongoing exploration of such issues as the meaning of professionalism, and the existential issues surrounding death and value, issues that social workers are often confronted with. A study was therefore conducted in an attempt to understand the impact of the SARS crisis on the social work students, and how the social work students handled the challenges and resolved the dilemmas involved. The aim of this study is to explore what the students' experiences tell us about professional social work principles, values and ethics, and to use this information for a critical appraisal of the merits and drawbacks of the current curriculum.

The study consists of two parts. The first part involves quantitative data collection using a questionnaire. The survey population includes all students majoring in social work in the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the academic year 2002/03. The survey is designed to measure the perceived impact of SARS on the social work students. As well as the survey, the study also used qualitative methods to examine the personal accounts by social work students of their experience of the SARS crisis. A total of four focus group interviews were held with a total of 23 research participants. Each focus group interview lasted approximately from one and a half to two and a half hours. Information was gathered on the participants' experiences as social work interns during the SARS period, and the critical incidents they encountered. Their perceptions of the impacts of the crisis and their self-reflection were also explored. The interviews were tape-recorded and the narratives were fully transcribed by research assistants via Chinese word processing. The transcriptions were then content analyzed to reveal the themes that emerged in different areas. We utilized the procedures involved in qualitative data analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Taylor & Bodgan, 1998), and used NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package, for data coding and data reduction.

The discussion in this paper is based on the data collected from the qualitative part of the study. Premised on the idea of reflective social work practice in contemporary society with the risks entailed in it, the central aim of this paper is to explore how the social work students processed their experience of risk during their exposure to the SARS crisis, and how they connected the experience to social work practice with clients. The findings of the study lead us, as social work educators, to reflect on the positive role of risk in the training of reflective social work practitioners.

Risk and Reflective Learning in Social Work Practice

SARS brought with it much risk and uncertainty when it attacked Hong Kong in 2003. Faced with the speedy spread of the virus, which hit 1,755 individuals and

claimed the lives of nearly 300, people found themselves having to deal with a new layer of complexity in making decisions in their everyday lives. For example, a new restraint entered into the conduct of normal social relations, as people had to refrain from the customary expression of courtesy by shaking hands, to contain the risk of contracting the virus through contagion.

Risk and ambiguity, however, are familiar to social work practitioners, who regularly have to deal with the various life decisions of individuals using social work services. As Ferguson (2001) noted, the complexity that contemporary social workers are confronted with lies in the increased choices that are open to people, which have to be made 'in the context of a heightened sense of how risky and consequential decisions are' (Ferguson, 2001, p. 46). Normatively, risk denotes the possibility of an occurrence of an undesirable state of reality, which is to be mitigated by avoiding or modifying the causal events or actions (Renn, 1992). The influence of postmodern thinking, however, has fueled growing skepticism about the possibility of identifying objective causes and of the availability of perfect knowledge of human behaviors. 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 subject rather to 'artistic and situated judgment' (Parton, 1998, p. 23). Social work is seldom routine. It involves working with people who are unique, in situations that are complex and it is almost never amenable to standardized or prescribed responses. With the demise of a vision of order, risk and uncertainty are increasingly recognized as inevitable in social work practice. 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).

It has not been easy for the young social work students who are the informants of this study to translate this philosophical disposition into real life practice with clients. Reflective learning is proposed by Taylor (1996) as a positive and creative approach to facing the unknown and unpredictable in social work practice. It is accepted that a capacity for reflective thinking is a distinctive requirement for social work practitioners, and therefore thought and reflection are key ideas in professional training, and are emphasized in social work education.

According to Boyd & Fales (1983), reflection or reflective learning is a process of thinking about and exploring an issue of concern that is triggered by an experience. Its aim 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. Boyd & Fales (1983) further identify 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. A central premise of reflective learning is the idea that knowledge is founded on experience. Schon (1987) conceives of social work professionals as 'reflective practitioners', where reflective practice is the practitioners' 'meaning creation' by building up exemplary themes through their case experiences, rather than applying general principles to individual cases (Schon, 1991a, 1991b). In reflective practices the practitioner is regarded as an artist (Schon,

1991a) who acknowledges ambivalence in scientific knowledge (Taylor & White, 2000) and adopts the 'knowledge as process' paradigm (Sheppard, 1995) to inform the conduct of good practice (Sheppard *et al.*, 2000).

In sum, reflective learning, as a process of meaning making embedded in experience, is often conceptualized as a response to a world of uncertainty and unpredictability, to which social work practitioners must learn to adapt. In our focus group interviews with the social work students we will address the process of reflection which an exposure to risk—the SARS crisis—has enabled.

The Findings

Transformation of Risk from a Normative Concept to a Personal Experience

Risk is not a novel concept. Risk assessment and risk management are popular ideas, not only in the insurance industry, but in everyday life as well. The prevalence of risk in social work practice was not new to the social work students we interviewed. Even before the SARS crisis, a final year student noted:

In the process of self-understanding, I learn how to bear responsibility for my own decisions. Every decision I make and every decision the client makes under my facilitation is itself a risk. In fact, every word I say in the helping process also involves risk taking—I can never perfectly know if my suggestion to the client can yield a positive outcome in the client's life. (A final year student)

However, in the narratives provided by the students on their experiences during the SARS crisis, we find more references to their personal risk than to risks to their clients, particularly among the second year students, whose first exposure to real life practice in field practicum started just two months after the outbreak of the SARS crisis. The presence of personal risk in social work practice is not a new discovery either. The students interviewed were able to recognize cognitively the inevitability of personal risk in their practice.

(Have you ever thought of a relationship between risk and social work?) Yes. Say, when I conduct a home visit, I choose to sit or stand close to the exit. Considering the possibility of danger, I inform my fieldmate of this before I go on 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 second year student)

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

I don't think social work is a particularly risky profession. Many jobs have a certain element of danger, e.g. the food and beverage industry. (A second year student)

Paradoxically, that risk is cognitively understood as a rule of life in general may have diluted these students' perceptions of its reality. The cognitive recognition of risk normalizes its occurrence, relegating it to a normative concept without any personal meaning.

I think every job has risk—construction workers also encounter risk. I have considered the possibility of risk in social work. But if it had not been for the SARS event, I would not have connected it with my personal safety, as well as the safety of my family and those related to me. (Another second year student)

Ostensibly, it is the SARS encounter that connects the normative recognition of risk to a genuinely personal experience. In the personal encounter with the environment of risk posed by the SARS epidemic, the students had to deal with a dilemma and engage in a struggle. They were required to have a dual loyalty—to the deprived population as well as to their own families.

Everybody had his/her own concern, e.g. that of safety. Some of us might wish to go on with their helping duty, but met with objections from their own family. I asked myself: what could be a better time to stand up and be counted as a social worker? At those crisis moments, it seemed that interpersonal encounter should be avoided, in order to contain the risk. How to face the situation was a question recurrently in my mind. I would think: if the center's services were suspended during the SARS crisis, what would all those residents and elders who used to rely on the center's services become? (A second year student)

Another second year social work student whose placement was interrupted by the SARS crisis also gave a narrative of her struggle and dilemma in the personal encounter with risk during her internship.

SARS brought 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 got in touch with her. But I felt that in so doing I would violate the very basic principles of human relationships, not just of social work. At that moment, the risk is just so close and real. (A second year student)

It is precisely the personal sense of risk made immediate by fear and anxiety, and the dilemma that comes with it 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 second year student)

Social work principles and values have meanings beyond book theories, when the personal encounter with risk poses a critical point at which the role of social work principles and values in resolving dilemmas is recognized.

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 live up to all these values? We are confronted with life situations, not made up cases, and not newspaper stuff. (A final year student)

When confronted by the real personal risk of SARS infection during their field practicum, it was the imminent choice between ‘fight’ and ‘flight’ that facilitated a reflection on social work professionalism among the social work students.

Reflections on Professionalism Arising from the Students’ Personal Experience of Risk

The students’ personal experience of risk led them to a new conception of professionalism in social work practice, a conception embedded in humanistic values rather than in instrumentality or academic order. They conceived of professionalism in social work as a personal commitment and manifestation of courage, embracing humanistic values and empathic appreciation of the clients’ feelings. A final year student narrated that she was furious when she was told to continue her fieldwork in order to uphold the professionalism of social work.

I think professionalism is blank ... instead of professionalism, I prefer to talk of dedication ... this is a term that makes me feel more at ease. I think it is pointless to sacrifice for a blank concept. Sacrifice is meaningful only when it is for human beings. (What actually do you mean by dedication?) Dedication is passion for people, something meaningful. Professionalism is grand but vague, something administrative and bureaucratic. Doing for its own sake. (A final year student)

Courage is identified as an essential component of professionalism, supported by a sense of mission, and manifested in perseverance in the act of helping.

Professional courage is not blind courage. The point is whether what you have learnt, the knowledge, could give you a sense of courage, a self-assurance that allows you to start the work. Say when we were involved in working on the SARS crisis, it was the sense of mission, the belief that I was doing something right, that kept me going. (A first year student)

To the students in the focus groups, the sense of mission and the courage to persist in professional duties was rooted in a belief in humanistic values.

(Professionalism) is a dedication to help those in need. You may not succeed in helping. But when you can accompany a human being in confronting his difficulty at the time of need, this is a manifestation of the value of care and love in an interpersonal relationship. (A final year student)

In the students’ rediscovery of professionalism from their personal experience of risk, expertise, knowledge and skills are secondary to values and commitment. Upon experiencing the decision dilemma in their personal encounter with risk, the students were more able to recognize and appreciate the complexity of decision-making in practice situations. Such recognition enables them to abandon instrumental reasoning premised on the expertise, knowledge and skills which are conventionally associated with social work professionalism.

Reflections on Social Work Education Arising from the Study

Despite the sense of inner discomfort it invoked during their field practicum, the students' direct exposure to the SARS crisis can by no means be described in simple terms as a misfortune. The exposure to personal risk brought about by the SARS crisis during their field placement created a sensation of fear and anxiety in the students, which sharpened their awareness of their dilemma and the choice necessarily involved in relation to their personal safety and professional responsibility. Their predicament, in fact, echoes the complexity of the decision-making process in all social work practice, a process which must be gone through with and for the clients. The pressing need to resolve the dilemma and the life and death choice gave their classroom knowledge a renewed and personalized meaning, and engendered the students' reflection on the nature of professionalism in social work. In confronting the dilemma and making the choice on human issues, social work professionalism, as constructed from the students' bona fide experience of risk, cherishes values and principles more than academic order and instrumental knowledge. Humanistic values are not at all novel to the social work curriculum. Nonetheless, it was the personal experience of struggle and dilemma in the face of risk and uncertainty that facilitated the internalization of those values among the social work students.

In all cases, the sense of devotion to the social work profession was personalized and internalized when the students were directly exposed to a personal risk that engendered a rethinking of their commitment to the helping profession. Therefore, it is the confrontation with dilemma and choice, which an environment of risk and uncertainty often elicits, that stimulates this reflective process. The survey part of this study, in fact, also verifies this relationship among the recognition of risk, reflection on professionalism, and devotion to the social work profession. The survey findings indicate that the more the students recognize the risks entailed in the social work profession, and the more they face the dilemma between 'fight' and 'flight', the more they will reflect on the profession, and the higher will be their devotion and commitment to the profession (Lam *et al.*, 2005).

The findings of the study stimulate our reflection, as social work educators, on the role of risk in the training of prospective social workers. Under the influence of scientism and the increasing demand for accountability in contemporary public management, risk has tended to carry negative connotations. Risk has to be identified, calculated, assessed, monitored, reduced and insured against (Parton, 1998). Our frame of thinking when confronted by the decision on whether to suspend the students' field practicum in the face of the SARS crisis was also led by the idea of risk assessment and risk aversion. In taking this cautious stance, our intention being to protect our students from harm and danger, we clearly underestimated their ability to resolve the risk confronting them. In the name of harm aversion, an exclusively calculating approach to risk can deprive our prospective social workers of the opportunity for discovery and reflective learning. It is the same calculating approach to risk that also encourages social work professionals to underestimate the ability of their clients (Christie & Mittler, 1999).

The formalization and standardization of procedures has been the favored approach to dealing with the uncertainty and ambiguity of decision-making in social work practice (Ferguson, 2001; Parton, 1998). Contemporary practice, highlighting skills and working procedures, reflects the dominant mentality of instrumental rationality under the influence of positivism and scientism. Where risks are unpredictable, it is nonetheless important for a reflective social worker to embrace the inevitable risk, to summon the courage needed to face uncertainty, to reflect on their practice by drawing on experiential knowledge of clients, and to be accountable for their decisions. This is the idea of developing the 'personhood' aspect of the profession rather than solely focusing on 'skills in occupation' in our professional training. We need to include both these areas in the social work curriculum if we are to prepare our students for practice in a risk society, a society in which uncertainty and ambiguity are inevitable.

The study has implications for the development of the social work curriculum. It confirms that the experience of risk carries the potential to unleash hidden reserves of creativity (Parton, 1998; Smith, 2001). Handling risk can engender an in-depth reflective process. Our experience with this group of students reminds us of the need to trust the students' ability to search for and obtain new knowledge, to explore questions in depth, and to be critically aware of and monitor their learning.

Risk is also a social construction (Christie & Mittler, 1999). The discourses on risk and the assessment of risk are moral enterprises rather than an 'objective' activity (Parton *et al.*, 1997). A dialogic process is therefore necessary to accommodate reflexive discussions between the students and the teachers, in order to produce attitudinal sets and alternative perspectives on their personal and professional world, and to encourage differences to emerge allowing more dynamic and productive decision-making. Besides developing students' competence in knowledge and skills, it is necessary to locate appropriate ways to build the notion of risk into the curriculum, and to work out a coherent framework of learning that enables students to engage in activities that can engender a dialogic and reflective process in them.

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