

# Challenges of social workers' involvement in the recovery of the 5.12 Wenchuan Earthquake in China

Huang Y, Fu Y, Wong H. Challenges of social workers' involvement in the recovery of the 5.12 Wenchuan Earthquake in China

This article explores the challenges of social workers' involvement in recovery work of the 5.12 Wenchuan Earthquake (12 May 2008). Six social workers working in three social work stations in Sichuan, China, were asked to report the challenges they faced in working with disaster survivors. Findings reveal that the social workers faced many challenges. These include lack of government support, low professional status of social work, rapid changes in the social environment in disaster-affected areas, lack of supervision, lack of cooperation and coordination among social service agencies, and lack of experience and knowledge in working with disaster survivors. The practical, educational and policy implications of the findings are addressed.

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The 5.12 Wenchuan Earthquake, measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale, hit Wenchuan County, Sichuan Province, and its neighbouring regions at 2:28 pm on 12 May 2008. The area affected was 440,000 square kilometres; 280,000 square kilometres of which were in Sichuan. The quake caused 69,226 deaths, 17,923 people missing and 374,643 injured (State Council, 2008). After the quake, social workers throughout China quickly responded to the call for disaster assistance. A number of studies (e.g., Bian, Wei, Feng, & Zhang, 2009; Chen, 2009; Xu, 2009; Zhang et al., 2009) were conducted to explore social workers' roles and functions in this quake recovery. The studies indicate that immediately after the quake, social workers were involved in setting up emergency settlement, investigating disaster information, organising donation activities and so on. After the survivors were settled, the social workers provided psychological counselling, mediation of family and neighbourhood relationships and so on. The interventions also included visiting and consoling, connecting volunteers to survivors, policy advocating and other measures.

However, research on the challenges of social workers involved in this earthquake recovery was thin. Except for one study (Bian et al., 2009), which reports the problems that social workers encountered in this disaster recovery within 8 months after this earthquake, little is known about the challenges that social workers faced in this recovery, especially those who provided long-term services for survivors. More research on this

topic is important because social workers' involvement in disaster recovery is a new phenomenon in China, and social workers are likely to need various kinds of support to provide professional services for disaster survivors (Bian et al., 2009; Huang, Zhou, & Wei, 2011). This study contributes to the research on the topic by exploring the challenges of social workers, who worked with survivors 3 years after the earthquake. It used a qualitative research method. Six social workers in three social work stations in the earthquake-affected areas in Sichuan, China, were approached and asked to report the challenges they faced in their work. The study reveals that they faced a variety of challenges. Implications of the findings for social work practice, education and research are addressed.

## Literature review

The management of disasters was designed as consisting of four phases: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery (National Governors' Association, 1978). Although the definition of recovery remains a subject of debate, the recovery involves short- and long-term efforts to rebuild disaster-affected communities and commences after the immediate threat lessens and survivors' basic needs are met (Berke, Karetz, & Wenger, 1993; Gardoni & Murphy, 2008). It includes reconstructing and restoring the disaster-stricken area, dealing with the community disruption and meeting the survivors' needs and mitigating future hazards

(Tierney, 1993). Several theories, such as systems theory, vulnerability theory, sociopolitical-ecology theory, feminist theory and emergent-norm theory have been adopted or developed to explain disaster recovery (Phillips, 2009). Different approaches to disaster recovery have also been proposed, such as a model of sustainable disaster recovery (Mileti, 1999) and a capabilities-based approach to recovery (Gardoni & Murphy, 2008).

The social work profession has long been involved in disaster recovery and contributes to psychosocial support for survivors (Gillespie, 2008; Tumelty, 1990; Webster, 1995; Zakour, 1996). However, social workers are likely to face various challenges in responding to disaster recovery. Davis (2012) examined the contextual challenges of crisis support work in the UK. He discussed the complex and contextual challenges facing UK local authority Crisis Support Teams, comprising largely volunteer social workers, who guide survivors and the bereaved through the traumatic first hours and days after disasters. He indicated that Crisis Support Teams faced three sets of challenges. The first set arose from the scale, characteristics and location of the incidents themselves. The second arose from the social contexts of the incidents. For example, some damage in the incidents may be minimised and some exaggerated. The third set arose from the relations within and between responder organisations themselves, such as the lack of coordination and cooperation within and between organisations. However, these sets of challenges have rarely been studied empirically. Meanwhile, ethical considerations may go unrecognised within the overwhelming and complex situations created by disasters (Pandya, 2010; Soliman & Rogge, 2002). Cultural sensitivity in providing services for disaster survivors could also be a challenge for social workers (Teasley & Moore, 2010; Wind, Kayser, & Shankar, 2009). Furthermore, a lack of emphasis on community organising in social work practice and education resulted in the challenge of engaging social workers in social development after disasters (Pyles, 2007).

A search of the literature reveals that only one set of challenges of social workers' involvement in disaster recovery has been intensively researched: the psychological impacts on social workers. Many studies demonstrate that social workers and other professionals working with disaster survivors experience compassion fatigue, burnout and secondary traumatic stress in one-time terror attacks and natural disasters (Adams, Figley, & Boscarino, 2008; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Pearlman & MacLan, 1995; Pulido, 2007). Social workers with double exposure, as professionals and as individuals, to the ongoing war experience intense emotional pressure, and those who have children living with them experience intensified work–family conflict (Baum, 2011). Accordingly, many programmes have

been developed to serve the psychological needs of social workers and other professionals in disaster recovery (Armstrong, Lund, McWright, & Tehenor, 1995; Cronin, Ryan, & Brier, 2007; Paton, 1997).

The literature also shows that social workers have limited training in working with disaster victims in the Caribbean (Rock & Corbin, 2007), Iran (Javadian, 2008), Taiwan (Chou, 2003) and mainland China (Bian et al., 2009). A study in Hong Kong on the competence of social work students in working with victims of the 2004 tsunami suggested that the existing curriculum did not adequately prepare them for disaster relief work (Tang & Cheung, 2007). These findings further imply that social workers in different countries or areas are likely to lack the knowledge and skills to work with disaster survivors. More research on the challenges of social workers in disaster recovery is urgently needed because it provides evidence upon which support for social workers in disaster recovery may be planned and delivered.

With respect to the Wenchuan Earthquake recovery, it was characteristic of strong central government control, weak participation by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and a lack of participation by people affected by the disaster (Huang et al., 2011; Tan, Huang, & Wang, 2011). The government controlled large amounts of financial resources and set the rules for recovery. However, among the 39 most severely earthquake-affected counties in Sichuan, less than four NGOs, on average, were found to be involved in recovery in each county in late July and early August 2009, let alone many NGOs had financial constraints and other difficulties (Huang et al., 2011). Meanwhile, the government focused on physical recovery, such as infrastructure and house reconstruction. Social recovery, such as rebuilding social relationships and functions, was rarely mentioned in government documents about this earthquake recovery, nor was the involvement of social workers in the recovery (Huang et al., 2011).

A survey in February and March 2009 showed that social workers encountered various problems in the Wenchuan Earthquake relief (Bian et al., 2009). Among 112 social work respondents, 75.9 per cent reported a lack of agency to refer clients, 67.9 per cent reported insufficient financial support, 50.0 per cent reported a lack of integration among individual social workers, 38.4 per cent reported the ambiguity of policies for social work in disaster aid, 37.5 per cent reported insufficient professional knowledge, 21.4 per cent reported an inability to focus on disaster aid which was their part-time work, 14.3 per cent reported a work overload, 9.8 per cent reported a lack of cooperation among social workers and 7.1 per cent reported a lack of support for social workers. However, many social workers in this survey were part-time workers and their involvement was short term. To develop a better

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants.

	Station 1		Station 2		Station 3	
	SW1-1	SW1-2	SW2-1	SW2-2	SW3-1	SW3-2
Sex	Female	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female
Age	27	28	23	23	26	25
Marital status	Married	Married	Single	Single	Single	Single
Year of graduation (degree)	2007 (BS)	2007 (BS)	2011 (BS)	2011 (BS)	2008 (BS) 2010 (MS)	2009 (BS)
Length of service in station	27 months	27 months	6 months practicum	6 months practicum	12 months	24 months

Note: SW, social worker; BS, Bachelor in Social Work; MS, Master in Social Work.

understanding of the challenges of social workers' involvement in this recovery, it is important to look at those full-time social workers who provided long-term services for survivors.

### Research method

The aim of this study was to explore the challenges of social workers working with disaster survivors 3 years after the Wenchuan Earthquake. In view of the limited knowledge available on this topic and its exploratory nature, the qualitative research method was chosen because it enables learning about social workers' subjective feelings, thoughts and experiences (Creswell, 2008; Gray, 2009; Patton, 1990). A grounded theory approach was used to enable researchers to generate concepts to understand the challenges facing social workers (Charmaz, 2006).

### Participants

Two social workers from each of three social work stations were interviewed for this research. The three stations were located in three earthquake-affected counties. Before the Wenchuan Earthquake, there was no social work agency or social worker in these communities. Station one was located in one of the most severely earthquake-affected counties. It was co-established in April 2009 by a university in Chengdu, Sichuan and a university in Hong Kong, and was financed by a Hong Kong fund. The station focused on organising older people and women to participate in group activities such as waist drumming, a traditional Chinese group activity, and dancing in a community where some 3,770 disaster survivors from nearby villages had been settled in early 2009. The intention was to foster groups of older people and women to strengthen and broaden their social network and promote their social participation. The station had only two staff members. Both had bachelor's degrees in social work.

Station two was located in a mildly earthquake-affected county. It was set up in early 2009 and financed

by a Taiwan fund. The station provided various social services such as visiting people with disabilities and the poor elderly, organising community cultural and recreational activities, tutoring children from poor families, setting up a local community library and so on. The station had four staff members. Two had social work degrees and two did not, nor did they have social work experience. The two with social work degrees were interviewed.

Station three was located in one of the most severely earthquake-affected counties. It was set up by a social work agency in Guangzhou, Guangdong, China, in June 2008, and funded by an overseas foundation. The station focused on providing services for a primary school of about 700 students. It also gradually extended to serve students' families and communities. The station had four staff members, three of whom had social work degrees. Two of them were interviewed.

Some socio-demographic characteristics of the six research participants are shown in Table 1. As we can see, all participants had bachelor's degrees in social work and one had both a bachelor's and a master's degree. It should be noted that both social workers in station two graduated from university in June 2011. However, they had a 6-month practicum in this station before they graduated. Except SW3-1, the other five social workers were in earthquake-affected areas when the Wenchuan Earthquake happened, but none of their family members died or were injured. None of the six social workers had other previous disaster exposure.

### Data collection

Data were collected through face-to-face, in-depth interviews in July 2011 by the first author of this article. Because the first author originally worked in an institute that did not have an ethical committee at the time of this data collection, this research did not go through ethical review. The managers of three stations were contacted and their oral consent to conduct research was obtained before data collection. Participants were told the purpose of the study before the interviews. The interviews were conducted and recorded after

participants' oral consent was obtained. Every social worker was interviewed once and each interview lasted about 45 minutes. The time and place for each interview was at the social workers' convenience.

### Data analysis

The transcripts of the interviews were read and analysed in Chinese, the researchers' first language, to avoid losing any meaning of the dialogue. Line-by-line review of the transcripts was conducted and was coded by highlighting key words. The themes were determined based on the highlighted key words and were established through phrases, sentences and segments of text. Based on the principle of saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), data were analysed interview by interview until no new theme emerged. Quotes representing the themes were selected from the transcripts and translated from Chinese into English. Investigator triangulation involving the three researchers was applied in the data analysis process. Each interview was reviewed individually and the themes were decided collectively by the three researchers.

### Results

The themes identified in the transcripts of the interviews are presented in the following. The challenges reported by social workers in each station are presented separately, because such a presentation provides a clear picture of the challenges for social workers in each station and allows researchers to compare the challenges among stations. The challenges were categorised into macro, mezzo and micro levels to differentiate the nature of challenges. The challenges related to social, professional or community factors are included in the macro level. Those about stations or agencies are included in the mezzo level. Those about personal knowledge, skills or experiences are included in the micro level.

#### Social work station one

Two social workers reported a total of seven challenges with their involvement in disaster recovery. Four were macro, two were mezzo and one was micro. The first macro challenge was the lack of government support for social workers. For example, SW1-1 said:

*In general, the government did not support us. We rented an office to provide services. Even local people felt that the government should give us an office . . . the government tended to be more concerned with hardware reconstruction, such as the reconstruction of roads and buildings. They paid little attention to spiritual and psycho-social recovery.*

The second challenge was local people's lack of understanding of social work. SW1-1 told us that:

*. . . the rural people had no idea what social work is. We had to spend a lot of time explaining it to them. Especially in the beginning, I felt frustrated because sometimes there were no people or just two or three people who came to participate in our activities.*

The third challenge was the high mobility of the residents in the community. SW1-2 pointed out:

*I felt one of the biggest problems was the uncertainty of the clients. The residents moved in and out quickly. Sometimes we had just built relationships with some clients, but they moved elsewhere and we lost contact with them.*

SW1-1 expressed the same opinion:

*I felt that the mobility of the clients was really a problem. It was difficult to do casework. In the community, some families moved to four or five places within a short time.*

The fourth challenge was handling the activities by untrained volunteers in the community. SW1-1 reported:

*I felt volunteers brought us many difficulties . . . during the summer holidays many came like travellers. They stayed one or two days, doing some activities that were not planned and taking photos. Sometimes, the volunteers bought the children anything that they asked for. Some just took photos with those children who looked clean and lovely and did not care about others. This hurt some children. We had to deal with these kinds of matters after the volunteers left.*

SW1-2 held the same view:

*Many volunteers came only with enthusiasm. They didn't have a plan, and we had to handle the negative consequences of their work.*

The first mezzo challenge was the lack of cooperation and coordination among social agencies that provided services in disaster-affected areas. SW1-1 told us:

*When I arrived at the station, there were four or five agencies working in the community. Sometimes they provided the same services and competed for service-users. There was a lack of consciousness among social agencies to cooperate and coordinate to provide better services.*

SW1-2 concurred:

*I feel that the lack of cooperation and coordination among agencies is a big problem. Every agency had*

*its own aims. Some were not willing to exchange with others. Probably they were afraid that others would steal their ideas. That's very bad.*

The second challenge was the lack of supervision and other support for social workers. For instance, SW1-1 indicated:

*... there is a lack of support for our work. Sometimes we felt helpless. We hoped to be more professional, but we did not have the ability to do some of the work without support. We did not have as much experience as frontline practitioners do. We needed supervision and consultation, which were not available in many cases.*

The micro challenge was the social workers' lack of experience with and knowledge about disaster recovery. For example, SW1-1 stated:

*Our social work education in university was not professional and systematic. Even our teachers did not have much practical social work experience ... for us, disaster social work was totally new, let alone disaster social work in rural areas.*

#### Social work station two

Two social workers indicated a total of four challenges during their service in disaster-affected areas. Two were macro, one was mezzo and one was micro. The first macro challenge was the lack of government support. SW2-2 said:

*I felt that we needed the government's acknowledgement of our work. The government rarely cared about what we did. We had to report to the officials frequently, but there was little feedback.*

SW2-1 told us:

*There were many limitations to being social workers there. We needed the government's understanding, support and acknowledgement.*

The second macro challenge was the social workers' uncertainty about professional development. SW2-1 stated:

*I am not sure whether I will be a social worker. A social worker's salary is low. It is hard to persist in being a social worker.*

SW2-2 also indicated that:

*... social work is not well acknowledged. Unlike students who study law and can be great lawyers, it seems that social workers do not have a clear goal.*

For the mezzo challenge, two social workers reported that there was a lack of communication and

discussion among staff, as well as supervision or direction from senior staff. SW2-1 pointed out that:

*... there was little communication among staff. I felt few people could give me advice.*

SW2-2 concurred:

*We had just graduated and needed professional supervision and direction, which were seldom available.*

With regard to micro challenges, two social workers pointed out the frustration due to ineffective work. SW2-1 expressed his feeling:

*Our work outcomes often did not fit the objectives. As you can see, our present class on organisation, coordination and communication cannot reach its objective. I feel very frustrated.*

SW2-1 also said:

*Sometimes I went to visit the poor elderly and felt depressed because I did not know what we could do.*

SW2-2 further pointed out:

*I feel our colleagues visiting older people and those with disabilities were not professional. They kept visiting to show that they cared about the clients, but it was not helpful to the clients.*

#### Social work station three

Two social workers reported eight challenges with their involvement in disaster recovery. Four were macro, two were mezzo and two were micro. The first macro challenge was lack of government support. SW3-1 expressed her opinion:

*The ideal model of disaster recovery is cooperation among the government, local people and social workers, so that social workers can participate in the government's disaster recovery plans ... however, the government was not concerned about us.*

The second macro challenge was the confusion and uncertainty about the social work profession. SW3-1 reported:

*We cannot see a future in the social work profession. We are not sure whether the government will support us ... we are not sure what will happen tomorrow. Many social workers have served two or three years. They need a stable life and family, but there are so many uncertainties about our profession.*

The third was the differences in values between partners. The social work station mainly provided services and organised activities at a primary school. However, some teachers in the school did not accept social work values. SW3-1 said:

Table 2. A summary of challenges reported by social workers in three stations.

	Station 1	Station 2	Station 3
Macro challenges	Lack of government support, rapid changes in social environment, handling the negative consequences of volunteer work, local people's lack of understanding of social work	Lack of government support, confusion and uncertainty about the social work profession	Lack of government support, rapid changes in the social environment, confusion and uncertainty about the social work profession, differences in values between partners
Mezzo challenges	Insufficient supervision and support, lack of cooperation and coordination among agencies	Insufficient supervision and support and lack of communication among staff	Insufficient supervision and support, lack of cooperation and coordination among agencies, recruitment and training of social workers
Micro challenges	Lack of experience with and knowledge about disaster recovery	Frustration due to ineffective work	Poor living and working conditions, lack of capacity to handle the change of focus of the work

*We organised activities to encourage students to actively participate in various kinds of activities in the school. However, some teachers felt that it was hard for them to manage if the students were active. They like students to be passive and just follow rules.*

The fourth macro challenge was the rapid change in the social environment in disaster-affected areas. SW3-1 told us that:

*... many difficulties with the involvement in school and community were due to rapid environmental changes. Besides the rapid changes in the physical environment, the staff of our partner agencies changed continually and quickly. Thus, it was difficult to build and maintain relationships with others ... our colleagues are young, and it is hard for them to handle these kinds of rapid change.*

SW3-1 also said:

*We had built a good relationship with the head of the primary school where we worked. He was open and accepted the ideas and values of social work. He really supported our work. However, he was transferred to another school in June 2009. The new head was not so open to and supportive of our work.*

The first of the two mezzo challenges concerned the recruitment and training of social workers. For instance, SW3-1 stated:

*In 2008, we recruited some local social workers; some came from Guangzhou ... but in all, our social workers had little experience ... the training of social workers costs a lot and remains a big problem ... the situation is a little better now ... however, our agency is in Guangzhou, and it is hard for the agency to provide sufficient support to us in Sichuan.*

The second challenge was the lack of cooperation and coordination among social service agencies. SW3-2 mentioned another agency in the school as an example:

*There is a lack of clear division between the two agencies ... although there is not an overlap in our services, there is no cooperation between the two agencies ... without coordination, there is generally a waste of human and other resources.*

The first micro challenge was the poor living and working conditions in disaster-affected areas. SW3-2 indicated that:

*It is very bad for our personal development if we stay here for a long time. This is a remote place. We do not have friends here. There is a lack of emotional and other types of support for us.*

The second challenge was the lack of capacity to handle the change of focus of the work. The station was planned to focus on school work and then changed to community work. It was hard for the social workers to handle the change. SW3-2 said:

*It is hard for me to cope with the change. We originally worked with primary school students. Later we worked with both students and communities. We had to change roles. I felt it was rather difficult.*

## Summary

The challenges reported by social workers in three stations are summarised in Table 2. In the three stations, there were two common challenges of lack of government support and insufficient supervision and support for frontline social workers. Each station also had distinct challenges.

## Discussion

This study indicates that social workers face many challenges. The finding about the common macro challenge of *lack of government support* is consistent with the arguments that, in China, the government pays little attention to social recovery after disasters (Huang et al.,

2011). It is also possible that government officials know little about social work and thus have no intention of supporting it. Previous research (e.g., Bian & Huang, 2010) found that many officials in disaster-affected areas mistook social workers for volunteers. Furthermore, the Chinese government tends to distrust NGOs (Wang, 2009). Given that all three stations were non-governmental and received financial support outside mainland China, it was likely that the government did not trust or support them.

The finding concerning the other common mezzo challenge of *insufficient supervision and support for social workers* might be due to the lack of experienced supervisors. The social work discipline was eliminated in 1952 in mainland China and resumed in 1988 (Xia & Guo, 2002; Yan & Tsang, 2005). Before the Wenchuan Earthquake, social workers in China were rarely involved in disaster recovery (Bian et al., 2009). Social work academics in mainland China have done little research on disaster social work. Thus, little evidence on effective social work practice with disaster survivors was available, and there was a lack of experienced social workers to provide supervision for inexperienced social workers in the Wenchuan Earthquake recovery.

One common mezzo challenge identified by stations one and three, *the lack of cooperation and coordination among social service agencies*, is consistent with a study that showed that 34.9 per cent of the 149 NGOs involved in the Wenchuan Earthquake recovery reported the lack of integration of resources among NGOs as a challenge (Huang et al., 2011). The lack or low level of cooperation and coordination among social agencies or helping professionals in disaster recovery has also been reported elsewhere (Bolstad & Endsley, 2005; Gillespie & Murty, 1994; McEntire, 1999; Pandya, 2010). With respect to the social agencies working with the Wenchuan Earthquake survivors, it is possible that they did not recognise the importance of coordination with others, due to their lack of experience in both disaster recovery and coordination with others. It should be noted that China's overall NGO sector is weak. The NGO sphere has begun to emerge only in recent years (Yan, Huang, Foster, & Tester, 2007). Meanwhile, building and maintaining coordination among social agencies requires time, commitment, information systems and other resources (Brenner, 2010; Comfort & Kapucu, 2006; Davis, 2012), but the majority of social agencies working with the earthquake survivors lacked financial and professional human resources (Huang et al., 2011). Furthermore, disasters may introduce cracks that impair the coordination between post-disaster service delivery networks (Gillespie & Murty, 1994). Additionally, the differences of coordination in disaster and day-to-day situations and the different connotations of coordination to different organisations add to the difficulties in coordinating

organisations in disaster recovery work (Quarantelli, 1982). The other common macro challenge identified by stations one and three, *the rapid changes in the social environment in disaster-affected areas*, may reflect the essence of disaster recovery and imply that social workers lack knowledge, skills and experience in dealing with rapid environmental changes.

The common macro challenge indicated by stations two and three, *confusion and uncertainty about the social work profession*, may reflect the fact that social work is underdeveloped in China. First, similar to Khinduka's (2001) observation, the status of social work in the hierarchy of professions is relatively low in China, as are social workers' salaries. Second, except for a few cities on the east coast, such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Shanghai, where the city government promotes contracting for purchase of social services, few social work positions and job opportunities were available in mainland China until early 2012. Social workers' experience with disaster survivors in Sichuan might not be helpful for them to find a job in the coastal cities. Thus, they had no confidence in the social work profession in China and were worried about their personal career development.

The finding that social workers in station one reported *handling the negative consequences of volunteer work* as a macro challenge highlights the importance of training and supervision for volunteers. Many people in China might have had an unreflected idea of volunteer work. Such spontaneous volunteering without competency, service delivery obligation and supervision could result in negative effects on the people whom the volunteers were hoping to help. Regarding the macro challenge of *local people's lack of understanding about social work* indicated by station one, probably there were few social workers in the Wenchuan Earthquake-affected areas, which were relatively underdeveloped, and thus the local people had few opportunities to deal with social workers and had little understanding of social work. Another explanation is that the information about social work in China was far from adequate. There have been few social work public education programmes in China. Thus, social work is not a visible profession, and most people have little understanding of it.

Regarding the three challenges suggested by social workers in station three, *the recruitment and training of social workers*, *the poor living and working conditions in disaster-affected areas* and *the change in the focus of the work*, perhaps the social workers in the present study had to work and live in rural areas and could not receive much support, which would result in few people, especially experienced social workers, being interested in such work. Therefore, the social work station could recruit only people without much work experience and accordingly reported challenges in

recruiting and training staff and changing the focus of their work.

The differences in the number and content of challenges reported by the three stations might be explained by the different responsibilities the social workers took and by the different experiences they had. In station one, there were only two staff members. Both of them had about 2 years' work experience before working in the station. They were jointly responsible for decisions about financial spending, strategies and skills in working with disaster survivors and other matters. Two social workers in station two had just graduated and lacked work experience. They mainly implemented the decisions which were made by other senior staff. In station three, one of the social workers in the study was the head of the station and the other focused on implementing the decisions. They also did not have work experience before working in the station.

Given that the majority of the challenges listed by social workers were macro challenges, perhaps social work was new to the people in the communities where the three stations were located. The local government and people needed some time to understand and accept social work. In addition, working with disaster survivors was difficult and required the understanding and support of the government, local people, partners and others. Therefore, macro support, such as the support from the government, the recognition of social work values by partners and the local people's understanding, was critical to ensuring effective practice with disaster survivors and thus was reported as challenges.

The challenges in this study are different from the problems social workers encountered in Bian et al.'s (2009) study, probably due to the different work that social workers did in different stages of disaster recovery. Many social work respondents in Bian et al.'s study focused on short-term emergency settlement and psychological relief of disaster survivors, whereas the social workers in the present focused on the long-term recovery of the survivors' social relations and functions.

It is surprising that none of the social workers in this study reported the challenge of psychological effects in disaster recovery, as was suggested in many previous studies (e.g., Adams et al., 2008; Boscarino, Figley, & Adams, 2004; Figley, 1995; Lev-Wiesel, Goldblatt, Eisikovits & Admi, 2009). Perhaps because the Wenchuan Earthquake happened more than 3 years before the present research was conducted, they had already adjusted to the psychological effects of working with survivors and thus did not report this as a challenge. It is also possible that they knew about the psychological effects associated with working with survivors when they decided to take the job. Thus, they might have perceived the psychological effects as a part of the job instead of as a challenge.

## Implications

The findings of the present study have the following implications. First, the findings of the macro challenges, *lack of government support, social workers' confusion and uncertainty about the social work profession and local people's lack of understanding about social work*, indicate that both social work academics and practitioners should find effective ways to help people understand and recognise social work in mainland China. As a relatively new field, social work is clearly not well known to the general public in China. Social work associations, especially China Association of Social Workers and China Association for Social Work Education, should run public education campaigns to make social work a visible profession and educate stakeholders, including citizens, the media, policymakers and employers, about the importance of the profession. Social workers could also promote local people's understanding of social work by having them participate in social work activities. Social work academics should also conduct more research to inform the government about the importance of social workers in disaster recovery.

The finding of macro challenges in *handling the negative consequences of volunteer work* shows the importance of training and supervision for volunteers. Social workers often recruit and work with volunteers (Garland, Myers, & Wolfer, 2008; Sherr, 2008). However, good intentions do not always get good results in volunteer work. To ensure the quality of volunteers, social workers and other professionals should make efforts to train volunteers and improve their competency. It is imperative that some social work values such as non-discrimination and equality be required in both the education and implementation of volunteer work.

Second, the finding of the mezzo challenges *insufficient supervision and support for social workers, the difficulty in recruitment and training of social workers and the lack of cooperation and coordination among social agencies* shows that social work agencies should find effective ways to keep experienced practitioners within the profession, such as paying them a competitive salary, so that they will also be able to supervise inexperienced social workers. In addition, more research on social workers' involvement in disaster recovery should be conducted to inform practitioners about effective and efficient practice. Given that effective disaster recovery requires cooperation, communication and coordination among government agencies as well as between government agencies and NGOs (Kapucu, 2006; Perrow, 2007; Tan, 2009), it is critical for social work agencies to invest resources to build and maintain relationships during their involvement in disaster recovery, such as the use of collaboration tools



and techniques to support the coordinated disaster recovery (Bolstad & Endsley, 2005). Social work agencies also need to learn from other organisations experienced in collaboration, such as the Aide et Action China Office reported by Zhang, Huang, and Li (2011). At the same time, social work educators and supervisors could collaborate with NGOs to train students and practitioners. In addition, social work associations could work as mediators and moderators to promote cooperation and coordination among social work agencies in disaster recovery.

Third, the findings of micro challenges, *the lack of knowledge and skills to work with disaster survivors* and *the lack of capacity to handle changes in the focus of the work*, point to the importance of including disaster recovery courses in social work education. There have been few such courses available for social work students in China (Bian et al., 2009). It is imperative that social work educators in China develop such courses to prepare students for disaster recovery. Social work associations or agencies could organise seminars or conferences for practitioners to exchange experiences and lessons of disaster recovery. This would improve social workers' skills in working with disaster survivors.

#### Limitations and direction of future research

The limitations of this study need to be addressed. First, only six social workers in three social work stations were interviewed; the stations were financially supported by Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas funds, respectively. These sources of funding might have placed more requirements on the stations to provide high-quality services than domestic did. Accordingly, the social workers in the present study might have reported more challenges than those who worked in the stations financially supported by domestic funds. This limits the generalisability of the findings. Future studies should use a quantitative research method to improve generalisability. Second, this study applied self-reported measures, which might reflect certain patterns of reporting bias. Future studies with other kinds of measures, such as a report from social work clients or managers, should be conducted to test the findings. Notwithstanding the limitations, this study can be regarded as pioneering, given that, to date, there have been few studies examining the challenges of social workers' involvement in disaster recovery in China.

#### Conclusion

This research explored the challenges facing social workers' involved in the Wenchuan Earthquake recovery. The results show that social workers faced many challenges. These challenges should not go unrecognised but be considered normal. By taking these

challenges seriously, considerable headway can be made in supporting social workers working with disaster survivors in China.

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