

## The Second Symposium on Field Experience

Mentoring of field experience with a focus on indigenization of western theories and knowledge

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### **Introduction**

Social work knowledge is developed with a Christian liberalistic background. Since the direct transplant of western theories in the third world, academics have raised the concern of 'professional imperialism'. Debate and discussion on the universalism of social work knowledge and practice has never been stopped. With the colonial background of Hong Kong, the profession has been formed since the 1960s with the contribution of local academics receiving a British education. The beginning education has been designed with direct transplant from the western world without regard to the different needs and culture at that time. Individuals from the academic or the practice field have raised the concern of suitability of Chinese culture in indigenization. However, it has received little echo from the practitioners until 1980s.

Recent literature has noted the importance of how Chinese culture has affected service delivery and reactions of clients especially in interacting with the family system. It has been called to note the sociocultural factors in shaping the interaction between family and health care professionals. Traditional culture norms, expectation especially the inseparable relationship between individual and family are called to be recognized in accumulating knowledge and practice experience. (Ma L.C., 1997) As social work is a cultural product of the developed world, direct transplant is seen as more irrelevant in the recent decades with more exploration on how culture affects human interaction. The West recognizes the socially constructed nature of social work. (Tsang K.T. & Yan M.C., 2001) Therefore, hot debate can be found on the universality of western knowledge on the Third World.

Although Hong Kong nowadays can hardly be called as third world, the influence of Chinese culture can still easily be found. How strong is such influence on trainees

and clients is yet to be found. Values and culture of trainees are also influential for the future of social work development. The mentioned research hopes to explore the value and cultural base of students and how it affects the mentoring experience in their placement.

### **Literature Review**

With a firmer build up of social work discourse in the western world, the West has started to question the universality of such knowledge and application since the 70s. Midgley has brought a famous concept of 'professional imperialism' into discussion in 1981. The belief that social work has universally relevant methodology and international professional identity can be called 'professional imperialism'. (Nimmagadda J. & Cowger C.D., 1999) It is true that direct transplant can be found in setting up local institute for training and local professionals in the beginning years are more in favour of western education than being conscious of Confucian culture. Such imperialism has raised conflicts and confusion among Taiwan students who have a stronger background of Chinese culture. Even Indian academics are aware of the cultural differences of Chinese aiming at harmony rather than provision of opportunities for one's development as advocated in the social work values. Therefore, social work in India is found to be inappropriate but such concern seems also not echoed by practitioners in the frontline. (Nimmagadda J. & Cowger C.D., 1999)

### **- Indigenization**

The discovery of the distinctiveness of local culture has called for the effort in indigenization. Since the development of social work profession, industrialization is also in process which has truncated local knowledge. Therefore, professional support in indigenization is weak in India. The same story can be found in Hong Kong. Fortunately, with the development of economic aspect, professionals have the space to reflect on indigenizing western thoughts especially on how to adapt such thoughts to bring to the arena in China.

Indigenization effort is found to be particularly slow in Asia. Consciousness of cultural influence needs to be raised continually. Therefore, more understanding on the essence of indigenization is needed. Indigenization is possible through language consciousness and the use of local knowledge and belief system. According to Shawky's definition, indigenization is adapting imported ideas to fit local needs. Such adaptation is a process between intervention technology and socio-cultural environment. (Nimmagadda J. & Cowger C.D., 1999) To conclude, indigenization

is possible only with exploration and reflection on local culture influencing clients and professionals.

#### - **Social work discourse**

Tsang and Yan have noted the issue of Chinese corpus and western application. (Tsang K.T. & Yan M.C., 2001) In the process of indigenization, four aspects of social work discourse needs to be noted with reference to local environment. Therefore, the following analyze would be on how to indigenize social work discourse with reference to local culture.

### **1. Ideology**

Souflee has mentioned that ideology is an action-oriented, value-integrating and value-legitimizing force that solidifies the community and defines its meaning and by extension, its purpose. Hong Kong is noted still a Confucian society although its influence is not apparent as China or Taiwan. The western ideology is also present. It is noted that clients are generally coming from lower and working class. However, professionals receive western education. Would incongruence occur when two value system interacts? Such question is hoped to be explored when interviewing local trainees.

### **2. Teleology**

Ideology defines teleology and it is dictated by cultural context. It is more concerned with dual forces between individual and society. The strong spirit of individualism in America can be noted in such interpretation of the dichotomy. Teleology is reflected in its mission of better integration of person-in-environment with the tie to system theory since 1970s. Even in the western world, academics have faced revolution of system theory and notes the importance of family system. However, Chinese culture has dispute with the western view on change. Conflict with government is also discouraged by the state. (Tsang K.T. & Yan M.C., 2001) Such phenomenon is more visible after 1997 in the local society.

### **3. Epistemology**

The search for relevant knowledge is a main component in the indigenization process. In such searching process, the risk of feeding elite discourse is present. How much is voice and role of clients noted in literature? In being conscious of the local needs, diversity and pluralism is called for in building up local knowledge.

#### **4. Technology**

Again, technology does not need to be copied from the west. In the early development, we do not have the space or wisdom to avoid doing so. With decades of soul searching, it is far more mature for practitioners and academics to derive appropriate technology which is culturally friendly. In such process, local literature has continually discovered that local culture calls for technological adaptations with the cultural differences found as follows:

- father's role: in traditional family, father has shared even lesser emotional burden on parenting and yet their authority is noted in family
- suppression of feelings: Chinese is more action-oriented and discourages expression of feelings. The lack of language in this aspect poses difficulty also to practitioners.
- Harmony: family and collectivism is viewed as more important than individual. Harmonious relationship needs to be maintained and so conflicts are avoided. Therefore, it is not strange to note that social workers are viewed as trouble maker.
- Hierarchy: role definition is strong. Authority such as professional voice is viewed as significant by clients. Self-determination is sometimes a foreign language for Chinese clients.
- Perfectionist: Confucianism stresses on self-perfection. Chinese parenting is strict and punishment is more significant than appreciation. It seems that Chinese tends to have a lower self-image.
- Self-reliance: self is viewed as the children of the state. Individuals are asked to be self-reliance rather than depending on welfare. Welfare reception is viewed as shame rather than rights. Such concept is further reinforced by local government.

In noting the cultural significance in applying the discourse in local practice, further exploration is needed in order to note the gap between local culture and western knowledge.

#### **History of local indigenization**

Indigenization is a slowly gathering force with its root back in 60s. Four stages can be identifies in the process of development:

##### **1. The stage of western favouritism**

In the general meeting of Hong Kong Social Work Association in 1966, minority views are accepted not to rewrite the code of ethics in Chinese. Although

reservation is raised by Nathan Cohen, R O Hall and Rev. K.L. Stumpf, no echo is found among practitioners.

## **2. The stage of awakening**

Indigenization voices are heard again in the 70s. Ken Huang, lecturer at the University of Hong Kong is the first indigenous social worker to raise concern of the problem of transplanting casework which favours white, Anglo-Saxon protestant with middle-class background. Indigenous tone can be found in the new Code of Ethics for Social Workers in 1978 although the concept of family still does not exist. Academics have raised more different voice including Kenneth Chau, David Ho and Peter Hodge.

## **3. The stage of contextualization**

In the 80s, consensus is reached among practitioners and academics on the need of indigenization. In 1987, working group of the Education Committee of HKSWA publishes discussion on helping family cope with problems. At last, the importance of family is noted. Ng Shui Lai propounds the concept of contextualization receiving echo from Grace Ko and David Ho.

## **4. The stage of indigenization**

Literature is accumulating in the 90s on how to adapt foreign discourse. Richard Nann and Julia Tao have suggested suitable technology as well as the postulate of the Confucian root of local people although such postulate awaits further research.

(Lam C.W., 1996)

The history has unfolded an optimistic picture and yet the research gap is noted for example the cultural exhibit of local people. The Confucian postulate still needs further research evidence. Also, Kwong Wai Man has noted the importance of practice-created knowledge. (1996) The account of students can also be significant to unfold the confusion and difficulties faced by a beginning learner and practitioners. The following design is hoped to explore the story of students with their placement experience which is also their mentoring experience by supervisor. It is hoped to discover the cultural roots of clients and students and its implication on social work education and field mentoring.

## **Research Design**

Qualitative research is adopted hoping to draw common themes from thick description. Interest is on individual story and experience. The objectives of the research is to:

1. explore the cultural roots and level of identification with Chinese culture of local students

2. discover the experience of placement and whether there is any cultural shock in applying social work theories.
3. analyze student's views towards compatibility of western theories and local context

- **Subject**

The writer is a fieldwork supervisor at a local institute. 7 students are recruited to share their experience and views on culture and social work knowledge. They are taking the block summer placement under supervision of the writer. Their background is various:

Jason: male, part-time student. He is not working in the helping profession and only studies social work out of interest. He is married and ages around 35 with no children. He lives apart from his parents. He is taking his last placement in a government center giving tangible help to families.

Chu: she is the fieldmate of Jason. She is married with 2 children aging around 10 years old. She is a part-time student and ages around 35. She works in the rehabilitation service for 18 years. Her post is a non-professional one.

Ying: she is a part-time student, single and ages around 25. She has worked for a few years in the elderly field. This is her last placement in a government setting providing residential and correctional service to teenage girls.

Lisa: she is a part-time student, single and ages around 25. She has worked for a few years in the field of youth service. She is the fieldmate of Ying.

Hen: Male, full time student ages around 20 with no working experience. This is his first placement at a community center.

Yan: female, full time student ages around 20 with no working experience. She is the fieldmate of Hen.

Jo: female, full time student ages around 20 with no working experience. She is taking her first placement at the rehabilitation field.

All full time students are at the end of the first year in their two-year high diploma training. Part time students are at the end of their 4 year diploma training.

## **Research Methodology**

Interview and focus group are the major means to gather data. Individual interview is arranged at the start of the placement in June, 2002. Each interview lasts for 1 to 1.5 hours. The interviews aim to discover how students view their cultural roots and relevancy of social work knowledge. Focus group discussion is arranged for all students after the end of placement in August, 2002. Free discussion is held to discover and share their placement experience with regard to cultural perspective. The discussion has lasted for 2 hours. Audio taping is done to analyze the themes and content of discussion.

### **- Interview and discussion guide**

The following questions are asked to facilitate sharing and discussion in interview and focus group discussion:

1. If 0 signifies total identification with western culture and 10 marks signifies total identification with Chinese culture, how will you mark yourself? Why?
2. What is your views towards Chinese and Western cultures? What are they for you?
3. How is your cultural views formed?
4. Do you think social work knowledge and theories are brought from the western culture? Do you think they are relevant to Hong Kong clients?
5. Do you have any cultural shock in interacting with your clients?
6. What are the cultural roots of your clients?
7. Are the social work theories and skills relevant to local clients?

### **Data Analyze**

Writer has identified common themes and also differences among different groups of students. Consistency is found before and after placement. The following themes are identified:

1. Mixture of Chinese and western thoughts: individual differences are great with regard to cultural views and roots. Majority of students have a balanced mixture of both cultures except Yan and Chu. They identify mostly with Chinese culture while Hen is the opposite with extreme dislike of Chinese culture. It can be noted that Chinese culture has exhibited in various form in Hong Kong and so complication in indigenization can be anticipated. Students have different definitions towards what is Chinese culture. Hot debate occurs towards different definition such as whether gender role differentiation defines Chinese culture. However, a common definition is the stress on family relationship. How their

cultural views are formed mainly base on family upbringings.

2. High regard on congruence: most students mention their cultural favouritism due to their perspective on whether such culture can exhibit sincerity and congruence between cognition and action. It is viewed that students place high regard on such value especially young students. However, it is interesting to note that students have different views towards what is congruence. For example, Yan views Chinese as culturally incongruent while Jo thinks the opposite. It is noted that cultural education varies a lot due to interpretation of teachers in high school as all young students receive education in a course on Chinese culture. All full-time students give feedback that the interpretation of teacher in that course is influential for them. For example, Hen has a strong dislike towards Chinese culture with the main influence of high school teacher.
3. Indigenized knowledge: all students have common views that the social work education they receive has already indigenized. Academics in the institute are culturally sensitive to explain the technology of indigenizing western knowledge and theories. It is encouraging to note that education has already noted the importance of indigenization.
4. Social work knowledge as westernized: although teaching has been culturally conscious, students all agree that social work has its western roots and adaptations are needed. However, as teaching has already based on an indigenized model, students have difficulty to identify the original western model.
5. cultural roots of clients: students have placement at different settings and so their perceptions of client's culture varies. It is noted that clients come from different classes and middle class clients generally have better education and is more in favour of social work intervention and vice versa for lower class clients. However, even among male elderly with little education, western thoughts can be identified such as perception of client towards divorce is a cultural shock for Jason. Therefore, mentoring experience should also note the class and cultural difference between students and clients.
6. Relevancy of social work theories and skills: young students tend to think of the contribution of social work theories and skills in complementing the cultural gap of Chinese clients such as emotional suppression. However, part-time students tend to think that adaptation is necessary in order for social work knowledge to be relevant for Chinese clients. Such views are more determined by their working experience rather than placement experience. Therefore, part-time students can also represent the view of practitioners in a way although they occupy non-professional post which is termed as welfare worker. It is also noted that their duties are usually not much different than a professional such as holding

developmental groups and casework intervention.

## **Discussion**

Common as well as different themes can be drawn to show the complicated picture of the local context. Interpretation can be drawn on designing suitable education element and program for students.

### 1. Effectiveness of course on Chinese culture

It is shown that education on Chinese culture is significant. Mature students have not received such education in high school and so their perceptions are mainly formed by family upbringings. Various interpretation and personal adaptation would be resulted. More consciousness on teaching cultural appreciation and a balanced view on Chinese culture would help student accept own roots and appreciate different views of clients due to their cultural differences. Just relying on high school education is dangerous as personal interpretation of teachers would create great difference to students. Therefore, more input on cultural conscious is needed in designing relevant program in social work education such as using indigenous materials and arranging cultural visit to heighten the awareness of students towards their idea of own culture.

### 2. Significance of interpretation of educators

Educators have found to play significant role in adapting western knowledge even for experienced and mature practitioners. Therefore, experience sharing and literature accumulation is important for students to grasp the art of indigenization. Or else, students may face difficulties in trial and error process of service delivery such as Lisa in delivering parenting program.

### 3. Exposure to different cultural background

Students tend to be limited by their experience and interaction with specific groups of clients. Therefore, placement experience is not rich enough for them to be conscious of cultural differences and the cultural gap between clients and professionals. Arranging field project for students to explore differences culture in the local context would expand their horizon and help them be more receptive to different views. Project on studying views of new arrivals can be one of the examples to help student with more cultural exposure.

### 4. Flexibility in placement design

Students have agreed that Chinese tend to be more reserved to share inner thoughts in

a group setting and so they have agreed that group is better to be a smaller number in the local context. However, they have raised the difficulties that supervisor only allows a group of at least eight members. It has shown the rigidity of task arrangement between supervisor and students. If the situation allows, supervisor should be more flexible to listen to student's views and allow space for students to experiment with different design. In the end, students can be encouraged to gather their own indigenized experience. Supervisor and educators should also be aware of the influence of Chinese culture in over-using authority in some ways.

### **Conclusion**

In the struggle between developing local knowledge in view of global knowledge, some have suggested to build up core knowledge instead of transplanting universal knowledge. No matter core or local knowledge, trainees are the future of the profession. They should have a clear idea of Chinese culture and its interplay with clients as well as their own selves. Social worker is a moral agent. Cultural consciousness is necessary for worker to achieve this role with the best awareness. Through this research, it is discovered that students have their different stories to tell. Their families have a lot to say to their cultural formation. Social work education is not to combat with such upbringing but rather to bring the unclear to the forefront. Through the research discussion, students are clearer of own views and the reasons of formation of certain views and biases.

The little attempt in this research is hoped to be a beginning of further exploration on indigenization especially to the implication of education and mentoring experience. Dependence upon foreign material leads to neglect and absence of indigenous study material. (Ngan R., 1993) Students also raise the issue of lacking indigenous materials and proper use of empathetic languages in interacting with clients. It is true that the medium of instruction for diploma students is Chinese and they mostly depend on Chinese materials although they are not so rich to fulfill their learning needs. In the process of indigenization, besides building up a culturally conscious program and placement design, developing indigenous materials is a major challenge in the coming years.

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