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Functions of social work supervision in Shenzhen: Insights from the cross-the-border supervision model

Introduction

Social work supervision is regarded as central to social work, as it determines the quality of service and both the level of professional development of social workers and their job satisfaction (Harkness, 1995; Tsui, 1997; Munson, 2002; Shulman, 2008). Influenced mostly by social work educators and social workers from Hong Kong, social work supervision has been recognized as an essential part of the field in China. Hong Kong social workers are tapped to provide different types of support to the development of social work in mainland China. Among the experiments of social work system in different cities, the Shenzhen model is unique in its structure and its cross-the-border supervision model, in which social workers from Hong Kong supervise those in Shenzhen. Based on the findings of an evaluation study on the first two phases of a supervision service project performed by a Hong Kong non-governmental organization (NGO), this paper sheds light on the nature of social work supervision in Shenzhen, which is a construction of the social work system, and the constraints of cross-the-border supervision, which are both structural and cultural.

The Shenzhen social work model

The Shenzhen project was started with the policy paper “Opinions concerning the establishment of social work manpower teams and the promotion of social work development,” also known as the “1+7” paper (for its one main document and seven appendices), issued in September 2007 by the Shenzhen municipal government. The paper, described as “the basic law of Shenzhen social work development” by the Head of the Shenzhen Civil Affairs Bureau (Minzhenju, the office of the Ministry of Civil Affairs at municipal level), clearly stipulated the basic institutional and policy setup of social work in the city (Lau, 2008). The first batch of social workers reported for duty in August of the same year.

The Shenzhen model is unique in China. Comparing it to that of other cities, such as Guangzhou and Beijing, some commentators have described the Shenzhen model as a “forceful and determined one” (Shen, 2008; Yuen, et al., 2009). It demonstrates the creativity and initiative of municipal government and Minzhenju officials in shaping the integration of social work into the existing social and political structure, mass organizations, and social service institutions. As social work is new to the nation, any structural changes require creating new social work posts and designing an employment and management structure. It is a challenge for the

Shenzhen municipal government to be the architect of social work in a social context in which social work has not been understood – or even recognized – by the public; it is even more challenging when government officials at different levels and in various bureaus and organizations do not possess even a basic understanding of it.

The unique model of Shenzhen is characterized by multiple systems involving state offices, mass organizations and NGOs; multi-level participation from municipal government to neighbourhood-level organizations; purchased services from NGOs in Shenzhen and Hong Kong; and the strong leadership of the Minzhenju. In daily operation, it is a tripartite model composed of social work organizations (commonly known as the employer organization, *pingren danwei*), the social service units (also known as the user organizations, *yongren danwei*), and the supervision organizations (*dudao jigou*), which are the Hong Kong non-governmental organizations (NGOs), while the Minzhenju performs the role of funder and coordinator. The Minzhenju does not hire social workers or provide social work services directly, but it assists the formation of non-governmental social work organizations (led by people it has identified as trustworthy) which do employ social workers. Funding is provided to them via a purchase scheme, according to the number of social workers they are required to hire. The responsibilities of the employer organizations are mainly administrative: recruiting social workers, training them, matching them with various

social service institutions (*shiye danwei*) as assigned by the Minzhenju, and assessing their performance. The user organizations in which these social workers are placed are either directly operated units under the Minzhenju or are run by street offices and mass organizations. Examples include neighborhood aid stations, elderly residential homes, and children's homes. The strength of this model lies in the full consideration given to the different aspects of the social work system and the involvement of multiple systems and levels, thus making rapid, large-scale development possible. There were already 15 employer organizations and more than 500 social workers employed as of November 2008. Poor coordination among organizations and lack of experience in their roles and responsibilities, however, have created hardships for some social workers during the early phases of the implementation of the model, as revealed in this study.

The backgrounds of social workers vary in terms of their formal training, university education, academic level, and geographic origin. Although a licensing system was in place, with the first national licensing examination conducted in June 2008, the link between licensure and employment for social work posts has not been established. Individuals can be hired for the posts whether or not they have received formal training in social work at the undergraduate or postgraduate level.

One major characteristic of the Shenzhen model is the “cross-the-border” social

work supervision project. Professional social work supervision is purchased from Hong Kong NGOs. The model is made possible not only by the physical proximity of the two places but by a number of favorable factors, including the fact that social work is well established in Hong Kong and that many Hong Kong NGOs are strongly motivated to contribute to the development of social work in the mainland.

Cross-the-border supervision is seen as desirable by the Minzhenju for professional, technical, and political reasons. Social work training in China is still developing at this stage. Quality of training varies among universities and programs, but overall, only a small proportion of university teachers have prior social work training, and fieldwork is often nothing more than an attachment to a social service administrative unit with little relevant work or proper supervision (Yan and Tsui, 2007; Law and Gu, 2008). Moreover, untrained university graduates can also be recruited to become social workers. Given these circumstances, on-the-job professional guidance is needed, but there is a lack of people in the *shiyè danwei* who can provide the necessary professional supervision. Also, training local social work supervisors as soon as possible is regarded as urgent in order to establish a self-reliant social work system. This is a process to which Hong Kong NGOs and experienced social workers can contribute. Lastly, there is a political function unique to Shenzhen. Because social work is new to all of the people involved in the system, including the local

government, the employers, and user organizations, experienced social workers from Hong Kong can serve as gatekeepers against manipulation and abuse, thus ensuring that social work is practiced professionally and providing feedback to the Minzhenju.

The cross-the-border supervision project

The first phase of the project was started by the Hong Kong Christian Service (HKCS), which began to provide supervision services in September 2007. The HKCS was contracted with to provide social work supervision for 33 social workers employed by two employer organizations and placed in 11 user organizations. The HKCS appointed four social workers; each visited Shenzhen one day per week to provide supervision. Phase Two of the “cross-the-border” supervision project was started in March 2008 and lasted until February 2009. The increase in the number of social workers and social work supervisors was drastic. There were 350 social workers, and supervision services were contracted out not only to the HKCS but also to the China Social Services and Development Research Centre, an organization formed by Hong Kong social workers and NGOs with a strong affiliation with the mainland. A total of 150 social workers from Hong Kong were appointed to provide supervision in Shenzhen in Phase Two.

The service contract of the supervision project stipulated that supervisors were to provide professional supervision at a supervisor-supervisee ratio of 1:8 (based on practice in Hong Kong), to monitor their fulfillment of service agreements drafted by the employer organizations, and to provide feedback to the Shenzhen Minzhenju regarding the operation of the system.

Research methodology

The first author has conducted an evaluation study of Phases One and Two of the “cross-the-border” supervision project in collaboration with the HKCS. As a service provider, the second author has a thorough understanding of the historical development and implementation of the service. The study was conducted during the period from July 2008 to March 2009. The major objective of the study was clear: to examine the effectiveness of the supervision service provided by the HKCS social workers (the supervisors) to social workers practicing in Shenzhen (the supervisees). The authors of this paper, however, share the urge to go beyond service evaluation to explore the strengths and challenges of the Shenzhen model by revealing issues in social work supervision.

For the evaluation of Phase One, we conducted two focus group interviews with

social workers (some with formal training, some without) in Shenzhen. In order to include all service settings, the participants were identified and invited by the HKCS. A focus group for the four social work supervisors was conducted in Hong Kong. Social workers were invited to write reflection papers on their experiences, which also became resources for analysis. Leading cadres of the user organizations were interviewed individually by the social workers placed with them. In evaluating Phase Two, we launched a quantitative survey on supervision satisfaction, with a response rate of over 70 percent. Since the start of the supervision project, the HKCS has collected information about the frequency, format, and content of supervisory activities. These service statistics also became valuable materials for our evaluation research.

Findings

Being new to the social work field, working in a new system, and being young and fresh (not to mention that a great majority are from other parts of China), social workers who took up the jobs in Shenzhen were motivated by the challenge to be pioneers in the development of social work in China. Despite their great enthusiasm, their experiences were fraught with difficulties caused by the lack of support from

both their employers and user organizations, poor understanding of social work by leaders and staff of the *shiye danwei* in which they were placed, and service agreements which may not fit the nature of services or over ambitious. Amid these frustrations, social workers in Shenzhen had high expectations of their supervisors from Hong Kong in five areas: emotional support, practical guidance, education in social work knowledge, skills and values, performing as a role model and communicating and negotiating with concerned organizations for resources and support. These expectations correlate with the three major functions of social work supervision, namely, the administrative, educational, and emotional functions (Erera and Lazar, 1994; Kadushin and Harkness, 2002). The supervisors were very committed social workers who had rich social work practice experience and a shared sense of mission in contributing to the development of social work in China.

Our data revealed that the greatest appreciation was for the emotional function of supervision. Social workers reported that supervisors provided emotional support by expressing encouragement, understanding, appreciation, reassurance, comfort, trust, acceptance, care, soothing and companionship, which effectively equipped them with the strength, courage, confidence, hope, and energy required to continue in their work. One social worker stated:

Their coming is no doubt giving us a ‘strengthening injection.’... Before having

supervision, my mind was empty and overwhelmed with a sense of powerlessness. Sharing with my supervisor and other social workers, to me, is an empowering process... If technical support is rendered without emotional care, the effectiveness [of supervision] will be very much reduced.

Another worker stated:

My colleague and I had been trying to start our work, but all work plans were turned down in the first half year. We had negotiated with the cadres [of the user organization] but were rejected again and again. When we told our supervisor about it, he did not blame our inability but cared for us. We were moved.

Given the difficult situation of the social workers in the early phases of the Shenzhen experiment, the emotional support of the supervisors was of special significance and was apparently given primacy by supervisors to address supervisees' felt needs for psychological support. There was a strong relationship between supervisors and supervisees and supervision serves the expressive-supportive leadership function as described by Kadushin & Harkness (2002), in which supervisees are offered emotional support when they have "job-related discouragement and discontent."

The educational function was also highly appreciated by supervisees. In view of

the state of social work education in China and also the employment of untrained social workers, supervisees had a keen motivation to acquire knowledge and skills through their supervisors. Also, advice on practical daily issues was badly needed, including problem solving, resource mobilization, and concrete suggestions on intervention, which was evidenced in service statistics. Focus group interviews revealed that social science and social work theories were discussed and individual supervisors also introduced therapy models such as solution-focus, cognitive-behavioral, and gestalt, which are popular among caseworkers in Hong Kong. Casework skills were covered most, followed by skills in program planning, implementation, and evaluation. One supervisor claimed to have borrowed the model of field supervision in social work education and focused on personal reflection, cultivation of social work values, and micro skills. Supervisors also brought in reference materials, which are scarce in China at this stage of social work development. The inculcation of social work values is worth mentioning: this was less evident in their expressed expectations, but social workers found it significant when later evaluating their supervisors. Reflections on personal and social work values and emotional involvement, principles of practice, and workplace ethics were covered in supervision sessions.

The achievements of both the support and educational functions of supervision,

however, were hampered by the supervisors' lack of contextualized knowledge: a limitation inherent in the cross-the-border supervision model. Two of the four supervisors, in fact, expressed anxiety about their inadequacies but soon realized that supervision was an interactive process whereby supervisees brought them up to speed on social policies and the social and political culture of Shenzhen, a process that one supervisor named "reverse supervision".

My greatest worry is whether I have [the knowledge]...about the civil affairs system and social work system in mainland China. I know nothing about the social services and social welfare [in Shenzhen]... If my supervisees ask me how to handle a case, I know well the resources available and how they can be mobilized in Hong Kong but not in Shenzhen. My confusion did not last long. I remember that the first few sessions of supervision were 'reverse supervision.' [I had to be] orientated by my supervisees about mainland China...

Supervisees' feedback reveals the limitations of cross-the-border supervision when supervisors did not share their knowledge of local resources and the social context of their work. In this regard, there was a gap in expectations toward supervision. Supervisees lamented supervisors' lack of knowledge about the local social and political systems, which led to questions and challenges. Although

supervisors' contextualized understandings grew with time in most cases, social workers suffered during the process. Some had a feeling of being trapped between their supervisor's "ideal" and their own reality. The political culture was the most difficult part to explain to supervisors, as opined by supervisees, including the leadership style and authority of state cadres, and the organizational culture of state organizations. One supervisee expressed it vividly:

...Because the social and political system is totally different in Hong Kong, my supervisor always thinks in a Hong Kong way and raises questions about our work situation. We often have the feeling of 'being dumb and cannot express our bitterness'.

In these cases, not only the educational function but also the emotional support function of supervision was hampered, although on the whole, social workers appreciated the supervision service very much.

Not only deficient in their understanding of the macro environment, supervisors also lacked knowledge and experience in social service settings unique to China and absent in Hong Kong, such as services for the retired martyrs and neighborhood aid stations. One worker stated:

From the very beginning, he felt puzzled. He did not know what martyrs were

and what the service for them was about...

In consequence, supervisors sometimes made recommendations regarded as impractical or unfeasible by supervisees.

The methods the supervisor proposed are not feasible, I feel. He insisted we contact the parents of the children, but this is not allowed in our social service unit. He did not understand... The leader of the unit was very angry and scolded us, but the supervisor insisted strongly that we had to... It felt like being trapped in a conflict between the supervisor and the work unit... It felt painful...

Despite the constraints and tension, role modeling, nevertheless, remained impressive. As social work is new to China, there was a serious lack of role models. Experienced social workers from Hong Kong became a prototype of the ideal social worker and were taken as typical, even excellent, examples. Efficiency, punctuality, seriousness, diligence, and being positive, conscientious, passionate, and energetic were the general characteristics observed among supervisors, while respecting and enjoying the work and adhering to the values of social work formed the core of a professional image. Social workers opined that it is not only the work attitude but also the supervisors' approach to life that impressed them.

Administrative functions and authority were not included in the supervision service contract but, paradoxically, supervisors had to monitor the fulfillment of service agreements which were written mainly for a number of cases and/or groups. To be able to practice case and group work requires the support of the user organizations, so the administrative function of supervision could not be divorced from the expectations of the supervisees. Lacking the authority to deal with organizational issues, most supervisors resorted to a strategy of motivating the supervisees and educating them in the political skills needed to handle the situation. One supervisor worried that contextualized difficulties might become an excuse for supervisees and, therefore, would push them to test their limits. The feedback from supervisees, however, revealed dissatisfaction in this area. Communicating and coordinating with the user organizations to mobilize resources and support was mentioned most in their expectations toward supervision. This expectation was situated in the context of the early phase of development of the social work system in Shenzhen as well as the political culture of mainland China. The user organizations did not have adequate understanding about their roles and responsibilities regarding the placement of social workers and there was great variation in their expectations for social workers and the resources and support available. Complaints of being "administrat-ization", that is, being asked to perform administrative work such

as writing reports, performing counter duties and filing documents, were common among social workers, as were complaints about lack of office space, meeting space, and funding for activities. Being young and inexperienced and faced with the strong authority of leading cadres, social workers felt powerless, particularly in negotiating with leaders of the user organizations. They felt that their supervisors from Hong Kong were in a special, if not privileged, position to liaise with the concerned parties, including the employer and user organizations and the local government, and should exercise their professional influence to negotiate for a better work environment. One social worker opined:

Perhaps it is a Chinese characteristic! We talk to them (the cadres) but do not have the position and will not be respected. They will not listen, no matter what you say. If someone is in the position of supervisor with work experience, he is different in social status and hierarchical position. [They] would give him some 'face' (respect) at least.

Supervisors, however, felt they lacked the mandate to perform this role. They saw their position as "professional" supervisor and, moreover, they are from Hong Kong. Establishing a working relationship with the concerned organizations was not considered a priority and was also constrained by their tight schedules of supervisory

work. One supervisor made an effort to intervene by convincing the leading cadre of a user organization only to find that this would not apply to others who had a different view regarding the roles of the social workers. One supervisor shared his experience:

When the program plan was submitted, there were a lot of objections voiced. I thought it was not all right. Though we should not intervene but only give suggestions, I think it would not work if the situation continues. The social workers would not be able to achieve anything. I tried to discuss this with the mid-level cadres. They gave me some 'face' ...[since supervisors need to] work on personnel relationships. In the end, it was approved... The reason was that the staff of the work unit did not understand social work well and were afraid that these programs would interrupt their routine. Only when I could explain a little bit more and tell them that social workers need to fulfill the service agreement were they able to understand... If I don't help them (the social workers), they have to be submissive to the system...they have no other support except me...

He then made a remark about another user organization:

...at the beginning, they already declared that they wouldn't follow the instruction from Minzhengbu to provide case and group work. I could not do

anything.

Interestingly, responses from leading cadres of the user organizations revealed either apathy or strong expectations of social work supervisors from Hong Kong to act as bridges between the organization and the social workers or, even more, to provide feedback to them about the performance of the social workers, the service, and even social policies. Despite expectations from both the supervisees and the cadres of user organizations, intervening with the user organizations was rare and exceptional. Social workers were left to develop ways to handle their difficult situations with the encouragement and technical advice of their supervisors, who are also new to the system.

Discussion and conclusion

The functions of social work supervision vary with society and culture. Under the unique background of the Shenzhen experiment, social work supervision shares the dual nature of field supervision and on-the-job supervision, causing expectations from social workers and user organizations that can be in conflict at times. While field supervision focuses primarily on the educational function within a specific period of

time, practitioner's supervision should be able to ensure that service priorities and work plans are matched with organizational objectives in daily job management as well. However, because the supervisors in the system were "outsiders", they were not in a position to comprehend the organizational objectives fully. They were not endowed with the role and responsibility to intervene in organizational arrangements, but at the same time had to monitor the service output in order to ensure social workers fulfilled their service agreements. In situations in which the user organizations failed or refused to recognize social work, it is unclear who and which organizations have the responsibility to deal with this "structural" problem.

The great variation in the quality of social work education and the fact that untrained workers can be recruited has resulted in a high demand for the educational function of supervision, which resembles that of field supervision. The prevalence and intensity of once-a-week supervision is also a characteristic of field supervision. However, supervisees are no longer students but practitioners who have to handle their daily work and require more support in ongoing job management. This unique model of field-practitioner supervision suffers from competing demand in terms of tasks, the lack of supervisory authority in administrative areas and the variance in expectations from all concerned parties, including the supervisees, the user organizations and the supervisors. Measured according to the four main content areas

of supervision as defined by Kadushin and Harkness (2002) and Shulman (1993), the focus of the cross-the-border supervision is primarily on supervision of direct practice (guiding the social worker in assessment, intervention, and evaluation of client interventions), supervision of continued learning (developing the skills required for lifelong continual professional learning including the professional use of self) and supervision of job management (guiding the supervisees in work-related issues such as record-keeping and resolution of ethical issues), but deals little with the supervision of professional impact (guiding the social workers in dealing with other professionals, influencing policies and procedures in the professional environment, and affecting the political structure) hampered by the organizational and political context.

Empirical studies on the function of supervision across nations have revealed a consistent emphasis on the administrative function or it is at least viewed as one among other important functions (Poertner and Rapp, 1983; Tsui, 2005). In the case of Shenzhen, where cross-the-border supervision is practiced to provide professional social work supervision, there is an apparent limitation in this area. It is unclear whether administrative supervision is a responsibility of the employer organization or the user organization. Although Western studies have been inconclusive about the compatibility of administrative and educational functions of supervision and there are views which support the separation of these functions (Erera & Lazar, 1994), the case

of Shenzhen reflects the problems of this separation, particularly when the structure, practice and values of the service delivery system are not social-work friendly.

Although supervisors and supervisees were in agreement regarding the purposes of supervision relating to educational and support functions, the data indicate that supervisees expected their supervisors to also provide them with the necessary administrative support, particularly to foster a work-friendly organizational environment. The support and educational functions of social work supervision, in the end, cannot be detached from the administrative function and the social context. However, it is unrealistic and unfair to expect professionals across the border to be able to mediate among local parties and remedy problems inherent in the structure of the system. The impact of the social work system in particular and the macro sociopolitical structure and culture of the society remain central concerns in the practice of social work supervision.

Inherent in the cross-the-border supervision model is also the supervisors' lack of knowledge about the culture where social work is practiced. Although Hong Kong has been a part of China since 1997, social work education there has not included knowledge about China and the Chinese social welfare as a necessary component. The cultural sensitivity that is always emphasized in social work supervision is not only about diversity in race, gender, class, disability, religion, and other social divisions

embedded in the unique social and political context of a society, but also about differences across societies when cross-cultural supervision involves parties from different cultures and societies.

Finally, there is a significant insight from the Shenzhen experience that relates to the fundamental assumption of social work supervision. Central to the conventional understandings of supervision is the idea of one professional who knows more guiding the development of another who knows less (Shulman, 2008). Common to all models of social work supervision is the concept of “relationship” and the incorporation of a developmental approach, in which supervision is dynamic and evolves to meet the needs of the supervisees (Baker et al., 2002). The case of cross-the-border supervision lends support to an interactive style of supervision, which can be bidirectional rather than one way. It also touches upon fundamental issues about universalized versus contextualized nature of social work knowledge and skills. Similar to many other countries, addressing the tension between “imported” knowledge and “indigenous” knowledge becomes an urgent task for the development of social work in China (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008).

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