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Role of the Professional Helper in Disaster Intervention: Examples from the Wenchuan Earthquake in China

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Role of the Professional Helper in Disaster Intervention: Examples from the Wenchuan Earthquake in China

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This article highlights the different roles that social workers played in disaster intervention after the Wenchuan earthquake. Using 3 stages (i.e., rescue, temporary relocation, and reconstruction) as a time framework, we describe social workers' roles, their performance, and the achievements and challenges they faced while providing service to the people and communities affected by the earthquake. Moreover, we draw conclusions on best practices and lessons learned, and make recommendations for future practices and research.

KEYWORDS *capacity building, China, disaster management, disaster social work, natural disaster, post-disaster reconstruction, three-stage model, Wenchuan earthquake*

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The Wenchuan earthquake was the worst earthquake in recent Chinese history and one of the worst natural disasters encountered by the Chinese Communist Party government. The earthquake occurred on May 12, 2008 and reached a magnitude of 8.0 on the Richter scale, with its epicenter in Wenchuan County of Sichuan province. According to the Chinese government, at least 69,227 people were killed, 17,923 people were missing and presumed dead, 374,643 people were injured, and 1.5 million people were relocated because of the disaster (Xinhua Net, 2008a). Many of the victims were schoolchildren, due to the devastation of school buildings. Close to 14,000 schools in 159 counties in Sichuan province were damaged (Xinhua Net, 2008b). According to official estimates, 5,335 students died or were missing (Xinhua Net, 2009). About 90 counties, 900 townships, and 9,000 communities suffered severe damage. More than 13 million people lost their houses and millions were forced to live in temporary resettlement areas. More than 1 million farmers lost their land and 372,000 urban residents lost their jobs (Xinhua Net, 2008a). The disaster created an overwhelming, complex situation replete with challenges for an unprepared Chinese social work profession.

Social workers in Western societies have a long history of dealing with the aftermath of natural disasters (Ku, Ip, & Xiong, 2009). Social workers play an important role in the disaster management circle, from preparation to mitigation and recovery (Zakours, 1996). Furthermore, they are most effective at managing the symptomatology of posttraumatic stress, delivering relief resources and services to vulnerable populations (Galambos, 2005; Mitchell, 1983; Van den Eynde & Veno, 1999; Zakours, 1996), formulating and implementing different service plans (Banerjee & Gillespie, 1994; Dodds & Nuehring, 1996), organizing and advocating for the community (Pyles, 2007), rebuilding social relationships, and restoring social functions (Miller, 2012). Social workers' participation after natural disasters has always been "assumed rightfully automatic" (Ku et al., 2009, p. 148). However, this is not the case in China. Social workers in mainland China are less prepared for postdisaster intervention than their Western colleagues (Ku et al., 2009). They have very limited training in crisis intervention, case management, and direct mental health interventions, with no experience in postdisaster interventions before the Wenchuan earthquake.

The Wenchuan earthquake was "undoubtedly a monumental disaster" (Ku et al., 2009, p. 148), but it was also a defining moment for the Chinese social work profession. It is valuable to document the firsthand experiences of social workers involved in the disaster management of the different stages of rescue, temporary relocation, and reconstruction, to inform not only how the profession has grown stronger, but also how it influenced the rebuilding and recovery of affected areas. Most of the materials presented in this article come from personal experiences, as well as individual interviews and focus groups with social workers in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

THREE-STAGE MODEL

We use a three-stage model as a time framework, dividing the postdisaster intervention into unique stages: rescue, temporary relocation, and reconstruction. In different stages affected individuals, families, and communities have different needs and wants. In turn, social workers play different roles during each stage to provide services and promote recovery (Feng, 2008).

Because of the large military and government mobilization after the earthquake, the rescue phase after the Wenchuan earthquake only lasted about a week and ended when the Chinese government shifted its focus from rescuing victims to taking care of the survivors. In this period, most survivors believed that the disaster was an act of God and they truly appreciated the efficient and effective governmental intervention (Y. Zhang, 2008). The second phase began when people who lost their houses were temporarily relocated to unaffected communities, sport centers, or makeshift tent villages and ended when they moved to temporary resettlement areas. During this period, the Chinese government worked frantically to develop its relocation and reconstruction policy for disaster areas. At the same time, distrust between the government and survivors rose due to uncertainty and misinformation. Lu, Zhang, Zhang, Zhou, and Zhang (2010) demonstrated, via a survey of 492 survivors in the earthquake area, that individuals' satisfaction levels with the government (especially the local government) waned during this phase. The third phase began when survivors moved from sport centers, tent villages, or other temporary accommodation areas to temporary resettlement areas and ended when they finally moved back to their permanent houses. The Chinese government was able to manufacture more than 1 million prefabricated homes and established dozens of temporary resettlement areas across the disaster areas within the first 3 months of the earthquake. Each temporary resettlement area accommodated tens of thousands of people and functioned like a miniature township, with its own governing system, clinics, and markets. Usually families had private rooms, but used communal kitchens, restrooms, and shower facilities. Although experiences from other Asian earthquakes, such as the 921 earthquake in Taiwan in 1999 and the Kobe earthquake in Japan in 1995, suggested that the reconstruction phase could take over a decade, the Chinese government successfully moved most of the earthquake survivors back to their permanent homes in less than 3 years.

Although we applaud the achievements by the Chinese government in the rescue and resettlement efforts, we argue that the psychosocial reconstruction process (i.e., grieving, recovering a sense of hope and purpose, and connecting with others), takes much longer than rebuilding houses and repairing roads. Among the tough tasks of postdisaster community reconstruction, a major challenge for social workers was to help communities draw on their strengths and foster resiliency. The substantial amount of

deaths and injuries caused by the earthquake created a shortage of human resources in the communities affected and was socially and psychologically overwhelming, with much work that had to be done in areas such as grief and bereavement (on individual, family, and community levels). In addition, the challenges caused by the disaster surpassed the community's capacity to respond. Consequently, the communities lacked confidence, resources, and ideas on how best to effectively increase community capacity and foster psychosocial healing. In later sections, we examine in detail how Chinese social workers successfully linked "physical safety and survival needs to social emotional coping and community bonding" (Tan, this issue), thereby promoting individual, family, community, and social recovery, along with capacity building.

Social Work Interventions in the Rescue Phase

During the rescue stage, as the arduous relief work went on, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), medical personnel, volunteers, and teachers were generally considered to be the four most respected groups. They diligently carried out their roles and efficiently accomplished impossible tasks in the quake zones in selfless manners (Sim, 2009). In contrast, social workers in mainland China were not mobilized. One social worker articulated, "At that time, we were waiting and wondering 'What could we do?' We were waiting for opportunities and, in the meantime, receiving training from international experts on PTSD and risk management" (Beijing social worker).

This social worker's thoughts and frustrations are representative of many others: They wanted to go, but felt unprepared and lacked confidence. They were uncertain about their roles in the disaster intervention efforts and lacked the experience of providing such services because they were members of a new and emergent helping profession. Their uncertainty was also deeply related to a simple fact: China originally lacked a comprehensive national policy for disaster intervention. In a newly designed postdisaster national risk management system that arrived after the Wenchuan earthquake, the Chinese central government included only psychologists, rather than social workers, as providers of postdisaster mental health interventions. At that time the Ministry of Civil Affairs, overseeing all social work practices in China, hesitated to take the initiative and send social workers to the disaster areas. In particular, they were unsure about what social workers could do differently than psychologists or other helping professionals.

Moreover, local governments in the disaster areas did not understand professional social work practice and its potential to contribute to the rescue, resettlement, and reconstruction processes. Most local government officials did not know the differences between volunteers and professional social workers. At that time, local governments were already overwhelmed by the influx of more than 50,000 volunteers into the disaster areas and it was natural for them

to worry that added social workers in the disaster areas would burden already strained areas. As a result, local governments discouraged social workers from entering the disaster areas. For example, the cadres from the Shenzhen and Guangzhou Civil Affairs Departments intended to send social workers to the disaster areas, but were rejected by local governments.

Social Work Interventions in the Temporary Relocation Phase

The inaction of social workers in mainland China immediately after the earthquake changed into scattered mobilization during the temporary relocation phase. On May 20, 2008, 8 days after the earthquake, the first mainland China social work team from Shanghai arrived at the disaster area for an initial 3-day needs assessment. On May 27, the Ministry of Civil Affairs sent a team of 12 social work educators and other experts into the earthquake area. On the same day, the Guangzhou government also sent a group of 10 social workers into disaster areas (Wang, 2008). Many other central governing bodies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) outside the disaster areas followed the same practice, sending their needs assessment teams to different disaster areas. Soon after the needs assessments, these central governing bodies and NGOs started sending their professional social workers into the disaster areas to support relief efforts. Most of them stayed in the disaster area for 1 to 2 weeks and serviced the survivors in the temporary relocation areas and makeshift tent cities. For example, the All-China Women's Federation (AWF) sent a multidisciplinary team of two social workers, one medical doctor, and one teacher to the Wudu Township of Mianyang City in late May to provide 10 days of social services to survivors. Outside the disaster areas, social workers also served survivors who were relocated to their cities. For example, Guangdong Provincial Department of Civil Affairs provided social work services to more than 1,000 transferred patients in six hospitals from earthquake areas. During this period, social workers accumulated experiences responding to the disaster and performed various roles discussed, in turn, next.

SOCIAL WORKERS AS COORDINATORS OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAMS

In addition to providing direct services to earthquake survivors, many social workers also worked as coordinators of multidisciplinary teams. In many temporary relocation areas, social workers worked side-by-side with other professionals, often assuming team coordinator roles. One social worker we interviewed narrated her experience of the coordination of services:

I liked the cooperation of different professions within a team: The doctor was good at formulating relationships with survivors by offering physical examinations. The educator did some work with schools, teachers, and students. We acted as coordinators, and provided individual and group work. (AWF social worker)

Another social worker we interviewed used a metaphor of filling the gap to describe social workers' roles as coordinators among different professions during disaster management:

Usually different professions have their strengths and weakness, and they are familiar with working alone or by themselves. However, social workers like to work with others and fill the gap, integrating different social forces to make the society a better place to live. (Beijing social worker)

SOCIAL WORKERS WORKED AS COORDINATORS AMONG ORGANIZATIONS

Immediately after they arrived at the Mianzhu Sport Center (a temporary refuge for earthquake survivors), social workers from the Amity Foundation did a community audit and made a comprehensive list of organizations providing services. They found that most focused on the psychological needs of children and teenagers, whereas other vulnerable populations were neglected. They presented their findings to the government officials in charge of the center, hoping to better coordinate services provided by different organizations. They also identified service gaps and developed new services that were not provided by other organizations in the center, including support groups for mothers with infants and toddlers, women who lost their husbands, and parents who had child(ren) in senior high schools facing the college entrance examinations. As a social worker from the Amity Foundation said, "Even though we were not assigned as coordinators within the existing system, we still created space to perform the function of a coordinator" (Amity social worker).

SOCIAL WORKERS PROMOTED FAIR DISTRIBUTION

In the second stage, distribution of relief supplies, such as tents, water, food, clothes, and other supplies, was the local government's daily job. However, because the distribution adopted a top-down approach, these practices led to perceptions of unfair treatment among survivors. However, social workers are used to working with communities and are very sensitive to local needs, which made them excellent partners to governments in their relief efforts. A social worker from the Amity Foundation shared a story on how to promote fair distribution within a temporary relocation site:

Some movie and TV stars visited the resettlement areas and brought some expensive toys for children. However, not every child could receive a gift, which caused a sense of unfairness among children. So, we asked the headquarters to set a rule and let those movie and TV stars donate their gifts to the temporary school at the resettlement site, permitting every child to get the chance to play. (Amity social worker)

Social workers also channeled the needs of survivors to potential donors and helped donors understand the priorities of local communities. For

example, when bottled water and instant noodles became abundant in the earthquake area, social workers helped shift the focus to sanitary towels for women, milk powder and other supplementary foods for infants and toddlers, and medications for people with chronic illnesses (e.g., high blood pressure and diabetes).

SOCIAL WORKERS AS CONFLICT MEDIATORS

Social workers were involved in mediating conflicts between grieving parents who lost their children in the earthquake and the local governments who parents blamed for their children's death (because of the collapsed school buildings). A school in Mianzhu County was one of the collapsed schools with 127 students killed in the earthquake. The bereaved parents believed that it was the low-quality construction, rather than the earthquake, that killed their children and they asked, "Why did so many schools collapse, especially when compared to the relatively few government buildings that fell during the earthquake" (Chen, 2009, p. 181). Their sadness quickly turned to anger and they organized demonstrations and demanded a full investigation. When the conflict between angry parents and local governments escalated, social workers, organized by the National Working Committee on Children and Women, stepped in to divert the potentially dangerous confrontation. They helped parents voice their demands for justice and tried to divert direct confrontation that might harm parents or governmental officials. Chen (2009) vividly documented the whole process of conflict mediation as a social work team (e.g., challenges, achievements, frustrations, and reflections). In retrospect, Chen stated:

Social workers must confront their professional commitments not only as mediators, but also as professionals who are committed to pursue social justice. What makes it even more difficult for social workers in China working in mediation is that while the profession has spent much time and directing much attention to the practice of care and service delivery for improving individual and social wellbeing, there has been little discussion or debate on what constitutes fairness or justice, especially in the context of the Chinese value system and in terms of ethical standards. (p. 185)

Social Work Intervention in the Reconstruction Phase

During the reconstruction phase, both central and local governments in disaster areas were more enthusiastic about providing social work services for earthquake survivors. Social service centers were established in the temporary resettlement areas and the once fragmented and ad hoc social work intervention slowly turned into more organized long-term commitments (Lum, Wang, & Danso, 2010). Beginning in mid-June 2008, governments outside the disaster areas, collaborating with social work departments in

colleges and NGOs, started to deploy social work teams into the disaster areas to establish social service centers. For example, the Shenzhen Government, Shenzhen Social Workers Association, and several large NGOs jointly established a social services center in the Bikou Township of Gansu province. Similarly, the Guangzhou government, cooperating with Sun Yat Sun University and other NGOs, established a social services center in Yingxiu Township. The Shanghai government, collaborating with East China Polytechnic University, established a social services center in Dujiangyan County. During his field visit to the Dujiangyan reconstruction area in September 2009, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao praised the efforts of social workers in helping the disaster survivors, averting potential social conflicts, and promoting a harmonious society. That was the first time that social work was recognized by a national political leader in China.

By the end of 2009, more than 30 social service centers had been established since September 2008, and more than 1,000 social workers entered earthquake-affected areas to provide all kinds of services within the first year of the earthquake (Liu, 2009). At first, these social services centers were staffed by social workers from cities outside the disaster area, such as Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. Once established, they started hiring local social workers (usually recently graduated social work students and warm-hearted local people), with centers normally staffed by three or four social work staff (10 at most) and either an onsite supervisor or one that flew back and forth between big cities and sites. One third of these centers were established through collaborations with NGOs and universities from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Social work educators played an important role in the disaster relief and reconstruction process. They led social work teams into disaster areas for needs assessments and set up social service centers in temporary housing areas. They integrated concepts and skills developed outside of China with social work practices in Chinese contexts, and trained students and other social workers on the concepts and skills they needed to work effectively with disaster survivors. During the third phase, the roles of social workers expanded to include community organizing and advocacy, community economic development, case management, rebuilding social relationships, restoring social functions, continuously providing disaster mental health interventions, grief counseling, and running support groups for various vulnerable populations in the temporary resettlement areas.

SOCIAL WORKERS AS FACILITATORS OF COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL GRIEVING AND MOURNING

Social workers helped earthquake survivors feel more positive, hopeful, and connected. Chow, Chan, and Ho (2007) argued that there are unique factors to the judgment of a "good death" in China: (a) knowing the cause of death; (b) it was natural and timely; and (c) the deceased did not suffer. However,

the Wenchuan earthquake caused a lot of sudden, untimely, and violent deaths, resulting in painful and overwhelming grieving experiences for those who lost their loved ones. On an individual level, social workers provided emotional support to bereaved people and organized self-help mutual support groups for those with similar experiences. For example, a Guangzhou social worker noticed that a bereaved mother did not like the public tomb constructed by the local government because almost 10,000 dead bodies were buried there and she could not stand the thought of her two beloved girls being surrounded by strangers' dead bodies. In response, the social worker helped the grieving parent create an artistic picture frame to release her grief and aid in the remembrance of her daughters. On the collective level, they worked with people to encourage culturally meaningful forms of grief and mourning, especially making use of special days (e.g., anniversaries). For example, social workers organized people from the community to put white chrysanthemums in a river and fly Kong Ming lanterns with their best wishes to remember their deceased loved ones. Both chrysanthemums and Kong Ming lanterns have special cultural meanings in China, representing a beautiful form of collective grief and mourning.

SOCIAL WORKERS AS POLICY ADVOCATORS

Social workers also advocated on behalf of survivors to help shape reconstruction policies and practices, helping government officials understand the importance of supporting the established social relationships and networks of families and relatives, neighborhoods, and communities in the resettlement and reconstruction processes. For example, Shanghai social workers in the Qian Jian Ren Jia temporary housing communities noticed that the citizens there were assigned to their living accommodations through a lottery, disrupting their original social networks and relationships. Social workers drafted a policy recommendation that suggested keeping the original social network and relationships for future relocations. Furthermore, Shanghai social workers created a sense of community to encourage survivors to accept and improve their existing situations. Fei and Ip (2009) documented their experiences in detail:

We wanted to facilitate cooperation among the residents, government-resident communication, community ties, the establishment of a community administrative and residents' committees, mutual support among team leaders, cordial interaction, and other support networks in order to increase residents' capacity to take responsibility for their own services and management. (p. 192)

SOCIAL WORKERS AS COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

Most social workers in these centers used a community organizing approach to work directly with survivors and to empower them to actively participate

in rebuilding their lives. For example, the Jiannan Social Services Center collaborated with a local township government to organize a series of activities (e.g., singing and dancing party, garden party, drawing party for kids, and sports competitions) during the first spring festival after the earthquake. As a result, social workers and residents got to know each other better. Moreover, social workers made use of these activities to identify local expertise, familiarize themselves with the communities, and promote community cohesion among the residents. Similarly, Shanghai social workers provided training to staff in resident committees, using a group work format to teach them community work, communication, and community mobilization skills, and help them integrate equality, respect, and empathy into their daily work to make their work more efficient and improve their quality of life. During their community mobilization, training local volunteers and fostering local leadership was one particular strategy they used most, with the purpose of deepening the capacity of communities and ensuring achievement sustainability.

SOCIAL WORKERS LINK ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT WITH SOCIAL RECOVERY

Economic development was the issue that most residents in the earthquake-affected areas cared most about. Tackling this issue helped social workers make real connections with the local people, in turn improving victims' emotional well-being by promoting economic recovery. For example, the social services center run by Sun Yat Sun University organized a women's embroidery group for survivors (Pei, Zhang, & Ku, 2009). The group served a therapeutic and economic purpose. Their products were sold in Guangzhou and other big cities, with money channeled back to the community. As Pei and colleagues (2009) illustrated in their article:

Our aim was not only to enhance the capacity of the local community, but also to provide psychological and economic support. Our belief was that cooperation was key to building capacity and empowering. Our approach challenged the mainstream model of development, which champions individualism and competition; instead, we promoted a new form of collectivism based on mutual help, pooling of resources, and the active participation of women. (p. 160)

Other social work stations also attempted to link economic development and social recovery through other strategies. For example, Qingping social workers in Mianzhu County helped disadvantaged groups in the village rebuild their houses by loaning their money and establishing a mutual help system among residents: People helped one another build houses, thus saving expenses on human resources. In addition, they also tried other new strategies, such as providing microfinancing to alleviate poverty and helping the village residents establish a rural women's cooperation group. All of these endeavors were new for social workers and some of them clearly

articulated that lacking knowledge of economic development issues brought huge challenges to their daily community work.

CONCLUSIONS

The Wenchuan earthquake was a defining moment and a transformational experience for the social work profession in mainland China. As a new profession in China, social workers started to establish their strong professional identities, launched massive social work practices in the earthquake-affected areas, articulated their roles in different stages of postdisaster interventions, and accumulated their best indigenous practices and experiences. People, communities, and the government, at local and central levels, recognized their function of disaster intervention and acknowledged their efforts as a new helping profession. Through the succinct summarization of the involvement of Chinese social workers after the Wenchuan earthquake in this article, we believe that the following lessons can be learned from their experiences.

First, social workers in mainland China lacked the knowledge and experience to respond to a natural disaster like the Wenchuan earthquake. Instead, social workers from Hong Kong and Taiwan were more prepared because of their prior experience in other disasters. The Wenchuan earthquake accelerated the development of postdisaster social work interventions in mainland China. Immediately after the earthquake, Chinese social workers were very eager to learn how to help disaster survivors. Such ad hoc reactive enthusiasm should be channeled to systematic capacity building to prepare Chinese social workers for future disasters. In sum, both Shanghai and Guangzhou social workers can use their experiences from the Wenchuan earthquake to effectively deal with local disasters.

Second, there is a strong need to develop manuals and practice guidelines for postdisaster interventions in Chinese, and to combine disaster mitigation and intervention as part of mainstream social work curricula in China. Chinese social workers found out that there were very few manuals and practice guidelines that they could use to guide their actions. Although many disaster-related documents, such as Psychological First Aid and the FEMA field manual have been translated into Chinese, they might not be applicable in China. Systematic research needs to be conducted to develop indigenous approaches toward disaster interventions. It is also important that disaster mitigation and intervention be part of the mainstream social work curriculum, as colleges in mainland China are developing social work educational programs. In 2011, the Ministry of Civil Affairs published a book on disaster social work studies, Sun Yat Sun University published a book on disaster social work practice (H. Zhang, Pei, & Ku, 2011), and Wang and colleagues (2012), from Beijing Normal University, edited a social work casebook on the

Wenchuan earthquake. Taken together, these efforts contribute to disaster social work curriculum design within the current social work education system.

Third, the system perspective is unique to the social work profession, as we place an emphasis on understanding human needs and behaviors in the context of their social and physical environments. We found that this perspective is extremely useful in understanding how disaster affects the lives and well-being of survivors. Social workers can enhance the well-being of disaster survivors by managing the development of new support systems through advocacy and coordination roles. Social workers are also trained in a system perspective to understand the collaboration between different professions, as well as different institutions (e.g., different levels of government, NGOs, schools, and health care systems). Social workers are well equipped to provide case management and coordination among these different parties.

Finally, one major difference between social work and other helping professions is that most social work interventions are grounded in the community. Social workers in the disaster areas lived with the survivors in the temporary housing areas. They ate with the survivors and used the same public facilities. When compared to other helping professionals, social workers were easily the group most accepted by earthquake survivors. When other helping professionals like doctors and psychologists left, the social workers remained as companions of the survivors. Taken as a whole, the social work profession is not represented by heroic performances. Rather, it is the acts of persistence and companionship that qualify social workers as helping professionals and, arguably more important, win the hearts of the people.

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