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## THE KEY CHALLENGES OF WORKING WITH CHINESE MEN: SOCIAL WORKER ACCOUNTS

*Over the past two decades, increasingly more research has focused on the experience of Chinese men in their roles as fathers and husbands. Hong Kong, for its part, is still in the early stages of understanding this subject. A major breakthrough was made when a series of books on fathers and men in this regard appeared on the market. With a better understanding of the differences between men and women, a shortfall was found in the current social services system, where services have long been designed and implemented with women as the target group. It is now understood that what works for women, may not work for men. In recent years, different organizations have taken a more active role in understanding the varied needs of men.*

*To consolidate the experiences of working with men in both case and group work contexts, and to foster gender sensitivity in social service provision in the Hong Kong context, experienced case and group workers were invited to share four key problems that have been addressed in the community over the past decade. First were the difficulties associated with working with men, especially regarding recruitment to join the study. Second were both understanding and appreciating the characteristics of men and the stereotypes and stigmas associated with male roles. Third was the manner in which men cope with an increasing amount of feminism. Fourth was the future development track of the men's movement.*

*During phase one, experienced workers who had worked with male service users in a variety of Caritas service projects were invited to participate in focus group interviews. Eleven participants took part in two focus groups. The themes were elaborated on in individual, in-depth interviews during the second phase consisting of 10 participants.*

*The results extrapolated from the first theme demonstrated that the recruitment of male service users is one of the key difficulties, although the situation is improving as the use of wording/language becomes more attuned to male clients. In relation to the second theme, stereotypes are commonly presented in the field. For instance, men are expected to be self-reliant, strong, rational, omnipotent, and perform the role of providing financial stability for their families, yet they are marginalized within the family context. In a bid to accommodate the change of ideology in the current Hong Kong context, it is suggested that men should vocalize their needs and develop their own support networks.*

*In relation to the third theme, the workers pointed out that many things can be learnt from the feminist movement to ensure that the service users' voices are better heard. Future*

*studies should probe into these issues. Eventually, both male and female social service workers will be forced to redesign their language and mindsets to better facilitate interventions for male users.*

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## **Men as a unique culture**

Cultural sensitivity has been greatly emphasized during the post-modern era along with special concerns noted by helping professionals such as social workers and family therapists (McCarthy & Holliday, 2004); for example, helping professionals to increasingly consider the cultural aspects related to their work with their clients. This movement invites an exploration of the clients' cultural assumptions and how their lives are constrained by larger racial, sexual, and socio-economic forces (McGoldrick, 1998). Apart from this, many helping professionals today recognize that gender is a key cultural variable and a central mediator of the experiences in their clients' lives (Brooks & Good, 2001; McGoldrick, 1998). This recognition was largely initiated by feminist family therapists who advocated that female clients' experiences should be considered within the context of a patriarchal socio-cultural system (e.g. Hare-Mustin, 1987; Lerner, 1987). Extending this area of study, gender scholars soon began to pay closer attention to the experiences of men. Brooks and Good (2001) provoked the debate that boys, as well as girls, are harmed by a culture that fails to recognize boys' needs and stresses. Sinclair and Taylor (2004) explored the potency of a comprehensive approach to obtain a better understanding of the complexity of masculinity within a therapeutic context. They suggested that a social constructionist discursive approach could lead to more productive therapeutic work for men, assuming that a discursive analysis could acknowledge and honor the cultural context of masculinity.

Despite the advanced interest in exploring culture, much of the family therapy and social work literature persisted in overlooking the fact that male culture is unique (Brooks & Good, 2001; Dienhart, 2001). Dienhart noted that 'there is limited literature in the family therapy field specifically exploring therapeutic technique aimed at engaging men in the process of therapy' (2001, p. 24). There is a necessity to investigate the development of therapeutic interventions for addressing the restrictions of men's emotions, and the relationship between men's emotions and problems is agreed upon (Dienhart, 2001). Dienhart (2001) advocated that the work with men in the specialized field of couple and family therapy should include a gender-sensitive approach.

Against this backdrop, men's studies have emerged in Hong Kong during the last 15 years. Two main streams could be summarized. The first stream is practice studies initiated by several non-governmental organizations to investigate the needs of men, while the second stream is related to the topic of partner violence.

## **Men's study in contemporary Hong Kong**

During the last two decades, increasing emphasis has been placed on the needs of men (Chan, 2006, 2009a, 2009d). Hong Kong is still in the early stages of investigating and understanding this subject; however, a major breakthrough was made when a series of books on fathers and men was published (Au, 1992; Au & Choy, 1998; Choi, 1998). An understanding of the dissimilarities between men and women grew and it became clear that the current social service system lacked a critical component: the system had long been designed and implemented with women as the sole target group (Chan & Chan, 2000; Chan, 2002, 2009b, 2009c); yet, what works for women may not work for men. Recently, various organizations have taken a more active role in attempting to understand the various and distinct needs of males.

According to research conducted by Caritas Hong Kong (2003), low-income male service users are more likely to solve their problems themselves before seeking assistance. Close friends are their primary sources for disclosing feelings and problems before turning to families or social workers for assistance.

Despite the increasing availability of varied services for men (Caritas Hong Kong, 2009; Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, 2009; The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong, 2009), no other known studies have assessed the efficacy of the social services available for men in Hong Kong. The crisis management team from the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, support groups and self-awareness education from Caritas Hong Kong, and the Men's Health Service from the Family Planning Association of Hong Kong are currently the only services available for men in Hong Kong.

The Department of Health of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government (2008) has provided a website dedicated to the provision of services for men in Hong Kong. The site covers six subgroups: health resources, healthy sex life, mental health, occupational health, family harmony, and rehabilitation. However, it only provides the names of organizations and their contact numbers.

Several studies have focused on service users' perspectives (Caritas Hong Kong, 2003; Hong Kong Student Aid Society and the City University of Hong Kong, 2004; Hong Kong Federation of Youth, 1999). The viewpoints of the service users are essential, yet the perspectives of experts could also offer insight into the social service sector's offerings for men in Hong Kong. According to experienced social workers, social services for men should be further developed from the existing top-down approach. Regarding social workers' first-hand experiences, a full picture of the development of social services for men and of areas in need of further study and consideration could and should be specifically identified.

## **Men in partner violence**

The second stream of men's studies examines the topic of partner violence. As in the West, reported cases of partner violence have increased dramatically. The number of partner violence cases increased from 1,009 in 1998 to 6,843 in 2008 [Central Information Systems on Battered Spouse Cases & Sexual Violence Cases (CISBSSV), 2010], which is a six-fold increase within a span of 10 years in Hong Kong.

A self-report survey was conducted by Tang (1994), focusing on the prevalence of spousal aggression in Chinese families in Hong Kong. The sample comprised 246 female and 136 male undergraduate students who completed the questionnaires regarding their parents' domestic violence. It ascertained that 75% of the student sample reported inter-parental verbal aggression, and 14% reported incidents of physical violence between parents. Statistics on the occurrence of severe physical violence were not reported. In addition, Tang discovered that fathers were more likely to engage in verbal aggression against their spouses in Hong Kong than in other places. Fathers were identified as potential perpetrators of domestic violence.

Other than the victimization reports prepared by several related institutes such as the Central Information Systems on Battered Spouse Cases and Sexual Violence Cases (CISBSSV), Harmony House, and the Emergency unit of the hospital (Wong *et al.*, 1997), three pioneering and in-depth local studies were conducted by S. T. C. Chan, K. L. Chan, and C. M. Chan, in 1996, 2000, and 2005, respectively. They provided pertinent information and discussions on local men's violence that had occurred in their personal relationships.

Chan (1996) conducted the first etiological study of partner violence by interviewing 13 abused women who were primarily ex-residents of a woman's shelter. She found that power and control were the most salient and prevalent themes and features reported by her respondents. She then focused on traditional Chinese patriarchy and male dominance to explain her findings. Marital conflicts are perceived through a power/control lens and considered to be challenges to the husband's authority and control over his wife. However, the most important drawback of her study, as she noted herself, was its 'failure to incorporate men's perspectives and experiences in understanding the process and meaning of wife abuse' (Chan, 1996, p. 269). The complete data analysis regarding marriage development, marital conflicts, coping strategies of both partners, and violent episodes was based solely on the female partners' accounts. It reflects the serious obstacles that exist in reaching the men involved in partner violence cases.

Chan (2000) conducted another pioneering study on the cultural factors underlying Chinese men's violence directed at their partners. From the narrative accounts of 18 perpetrators, Chan proposed that *yi* (義), which refers to one's moral obligation, is one of the key concepts in traditional Chinese culture. It is an ideal mode of masculine identity and Chinese men hold it as a guiding principle for their social and spousal interactions. Chan conceived that *yi* (義) is a core concept of Chinese masculinity and is culturally and socially constructed. Within a spousal relationship, a man is expected to have *qing* (情) and *yi* (義), which denotes a husband's passion and responsibility as well as a wife's compliance with her husband's wishes. With reference to the 18 perpetrators, Chan disputed that these expectations of *yi* (義) are widely shared among men in our society and that male perpetrators in the research sample held these expectations rigidly, although their expectations of performing *yi* (義) were unrealistic.

Following this line of thought, Chan (2005) examined the manifestation and interplay of men's different 'faces' in accounting for their violent acts and behavior in their personal relationships. A total of eight men and their partners were recruited from a perpetrator treatment group to participate in this research. The 'chauvinistic face', 'vulnerable face', 'face in marital conflicts', and 'face in response to external

intervention' were the four identified faces of men. This study has contributed to gender research by pointing out the existence of men's multiple identity crises of finding their relationships to their own selves, with intimate partners, and with the larger society. A deeper and broader view of the issue provided by the involvement of the partners was another distinctive contribution of this study.

The narratives of both victims and perpetrators have been addressed, and the concept and impact of masculinity have become the major concerns in the field. The primary concern is how the concept of masculinity determines the way perpetrators respond to marital conflict. In fact, these three researchers are experienced practitioners in the field, and their observations have shed light on the development of male services. However, the last study, to a certain extent, attempted to differentiate itself from the other studies on male spousal and partner violence by undertaking clinical observations of the workers' viewpoints regarding controversial issues in the field.

## Methodology

The study reported here aims to examine social services for men through the perspective of experienced social workers in Hong Kong. This fresh perspective may provide some insights into the world of men and their need of such specific services. Experienced workers from Caritas Hong Kong family services and related projects, who are experienced in working with men, participated in this study. Knowledge of their valuable experiences will enable us to be more gender sensitive when providing social services to men in a Chinese context.

In brief, the objectives of the study are: (1) to consolidate the experiences of those working with men in group and casework contexts; and (2) to foster gender sensitivity practices in a Chinese context.

Caritas Hong Kong is a multi-service organization which has been founded since 1953. There are eight Integrated Family Services centers under Caritas Hong Kong, which are located in separate districts of Hong Kong. Each centre has about 16–18 professional social workers who provide direct services for individuals, families, females, or males, to satisfy their tangible or intangible needs within the service boundaries. Furthermore, Caritas Hong Kong has established many projects to cater for the needs of specific clients. The Men's Personal Growth Centre, one of those projects, has been in operation for more than 10 years. It serves not only the needs of a male clientele, but also arouses public concern with the needs of males in Hong Kong. In summary, the Caritas Hong Kong Family Service has a long history of working with men in a therapeutic group context. To date, it has undertaken quite a number of projects with regard to the needs of men, such as crisis intervention, anti-drug addiction, gambling prevention, sex therapy, and of course, men's services.

The inclusion criteria for the veteran workers were that they had to be experienced in handling case and group work with men undergoing a variety of problems. Sixteen workers met these criteria and participated in the study (Table 1). As previously mentioned, the study has two phases. Two focus group discussions were conducted in phase one in order to collect the initial responses to current and

**TABLE 1** Profiles of the respondents

| <i>Name<br/>(code)</i> | <i>Gender/years<br/>of experience</i> | <i>Focus<br/>group</i> | <i>Individual<br/>interview</i> | <i>Service experience</i>   |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| A                      | M/6                                   | ✓                      | ×                               | Marital counseling, parenting group, couple mutual help, and communication training                   |
| B                      | M/15                                  | ✓                      | ✓                               | Family counseling and groups, men's work  |
| C                      | M/18                                  | ✓                      | ✓                               | Family life education, volunteer group, and growth group for males                                    |
| D                      | M/23                                  | ✓                      | ✓                               | Family/marriage counseling, anti-gambling service, drug abuse service                                 |
| E                      | M/13                                  | ✓                      | ×                               | School social worker, family service  |
| F                      | M/25                                  | ✓                      | ✓                               | Medical social worker, family service (counseling, groups for divorced men and fathers)               |
| G                      | M/6                                   | ✓                      | ×                               | Support groups for unemployed males, parenting group, volunteer group                                 |
| H                      | M/8                                   | ✓                      | ×                               | Family life education, unemployed male mutual support group, volunteer group                          |
| I                      | M/25                                  | ✓                      | ×                               | Family life education, men counseling   |
| J                      | M/16                                  | ✓                      | ✓                               | Family services (male adult survivors of child abuse, fathers, single-parent father)                  |
| K                      | M/10                                  | ✓                      | ×                               | Youth services, family services   |
| L                      | M/3                                   | ×                      | ✓                               | Family services, male services  |
| M                      | M/10                                  | ×                      | ✓                               | Family crisis support services, group (male mutual support, adversity promotion)                      |
| N                      | M/19                                  | ×                      | ✓                               | Family service (group: extra-marital affairs, survivors of physical, sex abuse), school social worker |
| O                      | F/18                                  | ×                      | ✓                               | Family service, counseling for childhood trauma, groups for divorced males                            |
| P                      | F/22                                  | ×                      | ✓                               | School social worker, family life education   |

controversial issues in services for men. Eleven workers, who had worked with male service users in case and group work, participated in the discussions (Table 1).

The themes and patterns collected from this phase were further explored in the second phase of the study. Four themes were derived from phase one: (1) the various difficulties related to men's social services; (2) stereotypes of gender roles; (3) men's ability to cope with the feminist movement; and (4) the future development of work with men. In-depth individual interviews were conducted during phase two. In these interviews, the participants were invited to elaborate on their opinions, especially on the common themes and patterns that were examined in phase one. Ten workers participated in this phase (Table 1). It should be noted that five workers participated in both stages.

The data were analyzed based on the collected opinions. Priority was given to those interviewees engaged in the second phase and to the in-depth individual interviews. Therefore, the extrapolations of the results were drawn from the first

phase. In other words, the data analysis and overall discussions were based on the four areas mentioned above.

The researcher himself has been a practitioner for approximately 20 years. He has worked as a psychological counselor, family therapist, private practitioner, and as a chief executive officer of a non-government organization in this field. He has published a number of Chinese-language books about men. Recently, he published several book chapters and journal articles about men to draw further attention to their needs.

## Findings

### *1. Men and help-seeking behavior*

In the first category, the difficulties encountered by men at work, issues about recruitment, and the characteristics of the service setting were addressed as follows.

*Recruitment issue.* Most of the interviewed social workers said that recruiting male members, attracting males to use the social services, developing trust-filled working relationships with male clients, and using men's language to communicate with them were the major difficulties they faced when working with male clients. One participant said the following:

Recruitment for lower income men is really difficult, especially. They need a period of time to warm up to express their ideas and feelings freely.

(L)

Most respondents believed that only problematic persons who are unable to handle their own difficulties seek help from social workers. Hence, those who seek help are failures. Men are reluctant to admit that they have problems. They believe that masculine/chauvinistic/omnipotent, strong-willed, rational men should display resilience. Another participant suggested the following:

Men regard themselves as strong and as problem-solvers. Social services are just for the weak ... but they have changed nowadays ... They come to seek assistance. Whether we encourage them to seek further help entirely depends on our abilities to engage them through men's language.

(F)

*Exclusion from social services.* The settings of the social service centers are associated with the notion of 'catharsis' or expressing feelings without inhibition. This is not conducive to fostering close relationships with male clients. Men are not accustomed to expressing their feelings to social workers in a closed environment. Men consider both the centers' settings and the intervention skills to be 'feminine'. For example, workers tend to encourage clients to disclose their feelings, yet they ignore the phenomenon that the majority of Chinese men are relatively uneasy in expressing their feelings

freely, whereas women behave in the opposite way. It is easier for men to describe the setting and scenery than to describe their feelings, as the scenery may act as camouflage for hiding their deeply concealed feelings. The more 'feminine' the engagements, the more the men felt excluded. Two participants expressed the following:

Men are excluded from social services, because both the setting and the language expected are not for men. For example, most of the family service centers are rather feminine and women-friendly. The expectation to disclose one's feelings all the time somehow inhibits one's expression.

(D)

I (as a female worker) was surprised to find that (after 18 years of work experience) it is easier for men to describe the scenery than their feelings, and through those descriptions, I could sense their underlying feelings. I regret having used this feminine mode of enquiry, because it inhibits the men's abilities to express. Even worse is that the male clients may misinterpret the fact that I stand on the side of their wives, reinforcing the feminine nature of the setting and language that we normally use.

(O)

According to the findings, men have been stereotyped as less likely to seek professional assistance than women when facing illnesses and crises. Similarly, they indicated that the reluctance of men to access health and social services could be explained by the above reason as well. For social service workers to connect with men properly, especially those from low-income families, it is preferable to use straightforward and self-disclosing words, phrases, and manners rather than emotionally laden language.

However, Galdas *et al.* (2004) argued that there are significant gaps in the research evidence on men's health-related and help-seeking behaviors. The socialization of men and the resulting masculine ideologies may be the significant factors that contribute to men's decisions of seeking or not seeking help when confronted with illness.

In the meantime, if there is to be equality of opportunity for receiving social services, social work professionals should be committed to including minority and marginalized groups, where 'men in need' definitely fit. Social workers have the obligation to learn and use men's language to engage them properly.

## *2. Masculinity and re-victimization*

In the second category of gender role stereotyping, masculinity is the key concept that ought to be examined.

*Men in difficulties with their help-seeking behavior.* Undoubtedly, people go through trials and tribulations during their lives. In respecting their unwillingness to seek help until the last minute, men easily become depressed and lonely. Men's aggressiveness and their reluctance in admitting their failures cause isolation. They behave in this way



to uphold their dignity, and they believe that they improve their abilities if they solve their own problems.

Conversely, two consequences result from their failures in handling their own problems. First, a socially deviant method is employed, such as to harm themselves or others, because their failures have been exposed. Second, assistance is likely to be sought when facing a great deal of pressure from both themselves and from others. Therefore, men in difficulties feel alienated and ostracized most of the time. Their desire for assistance is frowned upon by people who see help-seeking behavior as unacceptable or weak. Two participants shed light on this:

Men have been trained to be independent for a long period of time, and they become perplexed in adjusting to the moment of dependent when seeking help. Besides, family members find it is odd to respond to a man who is rather dependent. This makes the men much more reluctant to seek help, and in turn, escalates feelings of loneliness. This phenomenon may exist in the context of social service provision, wherein workers replace the role of family members.

(B)

It is tremendously difficult for men to share their failures and difficulties, which is not an issue of whether men are brave enough, but rather how men articulate their responses to listeners who hold the belief that men should be strong.

(N)

*The gender role stereotyping effect.* Two participants said:

Gender role stereotyping refers to how society views men in certain roles, and of course women as well. The traditional patriarchal value still has a strong influence.

(J)

Men are still perceived through a traditional lens as having power in the career world, providing protection to the family, and never failing. They can be injured, but should never cry . . . Such gender stereotyping could fulfill the expectations of society and affirm societal values. This gender role stereotyping can have a dual effect: it could be a driving force to achieve, but could also provide pressure to bind the behavior of men.

(D)

From these two accounts, one can see that men ought to be successful, tough, persistent, self-reliant, self-sufficient, have the ability to protect their families, and provide financial support for their families. These are the gender roles of men as defined by our society. This kind of role definition is passed on from family to family and molded throughout the time spent in school. It is a seemingly normal socialization process in which everyone takes the stereotypes for granted; yet, when a man does not conform to his role, he will probably be criticized. Males gradually embody this kind of role. Simultaneously, when they are dealing with the difficulties beyond their capacities to handle, the first thought that often goes through their minds is one of self-blame rather than deciding to seek assistance. Such role stereotypes act as an impetus to

achieve goals, but also place huge pressure on men when they are unable to live up to society's specific expectations.

Summarizing the findings of this category, most of the interviewed social workers suggested that recruiting male members, attracting males to use social services, building trusting working relationships, and being attuned to men's communicating style and language were the major difficulties faced. Another relevant finding is the characterization of failing that people associate with those who seek help from social workers. Most people viewed seeking outside help as a sign of weakness, and thought that men tended to be self-reliant. They are loath to admit that they have problems, and they believe that able and self-reliant men should rely on their own abilities or solutions to overcome all their problems. This is seen as preferable to ever admitting having problems. Men do not easily share their innermost thoughts with others, because they are afraid of being vulnerable, exposing their weaknesses, and feeling insecure. In a group, members are required to trust each other and share their experiences without reservation, which is extremely difficult for men who do not easily confide in others, especially when facing a group of strangers. As a result, they are not willing to undergo group therapy processes, being skeptical of the efficacy of the healing process.

Recently, there has been a great increase in the number of studies conducted about the concept and impact of masculinity. Eisler and Skidmore (1987) found four mechanisms of masculinity accompanying masculine gender roles which often result in emotional stress. The four mechanisms emphasize: prevailing in situations that require fitness and strength; avoiding being perceived as emotional and thereby feminine; needing to conquer with regard to sexual matters and work; and needing to repress sensitivity and emotions, thereby restricting the display of emotions in accordance with traditional masculine customs.

Coles (2008) argued that men's real-life experiences of masculinity are not necessarily subordinated to the cultural ideal. Many men feel comfortable with their masculine identities despite the inability to conform to the authoritative, powerful ideal. Brooks and Silverstein (1995), however, highlighted the dark side of masculinity: the interpersonal patterns and behaviors that are profoundly harmful to society and to the men themselves. These include violence, sexual assault, alcohol and drug abuse, gambling, and work-addiction. Brooks and Silverstein further argued that gender role expectations shape the ways in which men perceive those who seek help and their behavior, their interpretations of the difficulties themselves, and the ways in which recovery proceeds.

Courtenay (2000) explored how factors such as ethnicity, economic status, educational level, sexual orientation, and social context influence the kind of masculinity that men construct, and how these factors contribute to differential health risks among men in the United States. It has also been noted that the notion of masculinity could bring about another level of traumatization once men find that they have no alternative but to fulfill their gender role expectations (Stibbe, 2004).

Based on the above, the standards of masculinity not only produce stress in some men, but also limit their abilities to relieve stress. Masculinity is conceived as the standard of the behavior expected of men and the mechanism with which to organize the public response to men. Help-seeking behavior is no longer an individual issue but a socially constructed phenomenon, in which men are recognized as the problem solvers. Men's responses to life's challenges are in part shaped by their gender socialization —

their internalization of masculine ideology (Fischer & Good, 1997). Thus, the treatment for male clients should incorporate an understanding of the interaction between trauma and masculinity (Mejia, 2005). After all, clinical observation indicates that the concept of masculinity might re-victimize men in need by stereotyping them, making those who seek help to be seen as weak and vulnerable. In certain circumstances, social workers can re-victimize men in need whenever they conform to the masculine mystique of being strong, omni-competent, rational–logical, and non-feminine.

### *3. A complex created by the feminist movement*

In the third category, of men coping within the context of the feminist movement, men face distinct challenges. At the same time, there is much to learn from the feminist movement.

*Power re-distribution between the genders.* With the development of feminism in the past three decades, the power of women has risen, allowing women to work outside the home. The empowerment of women has given them more confidence, and the growing economic independence of women has started to shift the gender balance of power. Ironically, it can be seen to be unacceptable for a man to stay at home and perform all the chores. Some may disagree with this, but the author believes they are in the minority. Furthermore, acceptance is not the same as recognition. Full-time fathers face much pressure that may result from their relatively ineffective communication skills, which impact on their relationships with their families. They need to overcome problems, as well as face criticism from others who generally see a househusband as weak. This puts most of the men in a thoughtful process of deciding if they will become full-time fathers. The following narratives by two workers illustrate these points.

Patriarchy is still the leading idea within the family, but the status of women is rising. They have rejected further oppression and have become more independent ... My observation is that more women decide to get divorces than men.

(C)

More women could have their voices heard and make their own choices, both in terms of career and family. On the other hand, full-time fathers are merely unemployed from their neighbors' viewpoints, they confronted a lot of pressure ... Certainly, some men are threatened by women.

(B)

*Learning from feminism.* Acknowledgement of the needs of men is indeed needed in order to evolve gender equality when people campaign for women's rights. When a society progresses over time and a greater degree of equality develops, however, some people may remain unaware of the needs of men. Due to the rising power of women, we may need to consider the impacts on men and whether the men are capable of adjusting to the new reality. After all, females who work outside of the home are commonly approved of in society. Why should we not judge the men who work at

home in a similar vein? The account of one of the social workers affirms the positive effects that feminism has had on men.

Feminism paves the way for men-ism, in fact. The development of feminism sheds light on menism in terms of direction and rationale. Men can modify their needs, not only in the area of growth and gender-role fulfillment, but also of their identities.

(N)

This is the difficulty created by the feminist movement. Men are challenged by that movement: the more women become empowered, the more men come to develop a sense of inferiority.

Enns (1993, p. 45) stressed that

the accumulation of knowledge has been controlled by a male hierarchy, and the shaping of knowledge has occurred in accordance with male criteria of achievement, performance, and so on, without regard for the ultimate effects on the quality of life or the nature of reality. Implicit in the feminist movement is that male perceptions have shaped the dominant view in society. This view controls the definition of women, social structures, and institutions, as well as thought and value patterns.

Ironically, this dominant view has also greatly limited and harmed men. From the feminist movement, however, men can learn to rebel against oppression and search for their own identity.

Instead of blaming the feminist movement, which fights against oppression from society, we should learn from the reports of the social workers and discover how to make the public hear the voices of the men in need and how to develop effective practices that directly address the needs of these men. The way that a feminist scholar deconstructs societal oppression paves the way for menism (Chan & Chan, 2000) to be developed.

#### *4. A fight to the finish?*

In the fourth category of the future development of men's services, the issue of men's transformations within the group context should be included, and providing innovative, gender-sensitive practice is also recommended.

*Change in the group context.* The liberation of men, the men's movement, and the continuation of working with men are considered important by most of the social workers engaged in providing social services to men. The social workers indicated that after male clients joined group counseling, they delivered ideas to aid the public in grasping men's help-seeking behaviors, giving an opportunity for men in need to express their feelings in our society. There were men who were willing to participate in group activities, and social workers could facilitate changes in this group of highly-

motivated male clients. New ideology is likely to be shaped and shared in the group process. Two participants shared their insightful ideas as follows:

Men can seldom alter their needs, but they are constructed to be the production machine in a capitalist society ... They will find it much easier to say what they think and feel in the group setting ... Through the support of the group members, they could change in a subtle way. They could also become mentors for others. (P)

More men are willing to participate in a group in which they vent, share, and listen to information that answers questions they may be too timid to ask. This is the group process that enables men to change. (J)

*Angled at men — innovative intervention.* We should create new interventions using men's perspectives as the foundation.

Traditional services have adopted a woman's perspective and assume that women are the victims. Women, of course, should be provided with good care and be given empathy. Given the fact that men are reluctant to be seen as 'losers', the empathetic engagement approach, which reinforces the role of being a 'loser', may not be suited to men.

Because of men's unique culture, the task-oriented method may be the more appropriate method to adopt when engaging male clients. Men would rather describe the entire picture of an event than express their feelings behind the picture. Some social workers suggest that they should have the awareness and skills to decipher the feelings behind the words. Female workers should undergo communication training to effectively work with lower-income class men instead of bemoaning men's resistances to change. Two of the participants summarized these ideas as follows:

Men need the opportunities to take 'action' when receiving services, or men could learn through action instead of thinking. Various innovative designs to engage men, as well as in the intervention process, should be adopted. (F)

There should be gender sensitivity training in social work that is not only based on theory but also on linguistic training. It is important to learn how to properly engage with men. The other concept is to train female workers to understand masculine language with a view to connecting with men. (M)

This category is, in effect, the summary of this study. It provides the way forward for men's services. With regard to the rising number of domestic violence cases reported [up from 1,009 in 1998 to about 6,843 in 2008 (CISBSSV, 2010)], other efforts could be undertaken to develop practices to meet the needs of men. One of these would be to enforce mandatory counseling for the perpetrators. The argument behind this idea is that the number of perpetrators was about 8,337 people in 2008 (including those involved in partner abuse, child abuse, and elderly abuse). This was

only a small sample of the men in need in Hong Kong, given that the population is over 6.5 million. Various innovative interventions should be developed to cater for the needs of men, especially specific target groups such as men in grief, divorced men, and lower-class unemployed men.

## Conclusion

By examining the four controversial themes developed by the workers who were invited to elaborate further, certain findings have emerged that are worthy of our attention. The author would like to conduct further investigation into the findings with reference to the aspects of practice.

### *Implications for practice*

*Gender-sensitive approach.* Gender-sensitive practice and training (Dienhart, 2001; Good *et al.*, 1990), in terms of male-focused service delivery and gender-specific practice theory and skills, should be developed in the field to fulfill the needs of men. Perceptual and conceptual skills have to do with what goes on in the mind of the therapist (Tomm & Wright, 1979). Analytical skills are a prerequisite of executive skills and the two are typically so intricately and integrally intertwined that they are difficult to separate. Expanding the social workers' views of the effects of socialization on both genders, clients, and workers is essential for conducting gender-sensitive practices.

In the West, traditional gender roles and family structure have been shown to adversely affect men in families (Cath *et al.*, 1989; Hanson & Bozett, 1985; Lewis & O'Brien, 1987). Gender-sensitive practice generally examines the ways to have men engage more fully in the context of professional assistance and requires the males to be mutually responsible with females for problems and changes in the family. Remarkably, feminist family therapy has evolved toward an integrated model of gender sensitivity; it often does not provide knowledge for the therapists to engage more men more fully in family work.

In Hong Kong, gender-sensitive practice has been developed, but only in the realm of feministic work. The author himself has conducted various projects related to men, the targets comprising male sex abuse survivors, men going through divorce, lower-class men, and married men, in collaboration with various non-government organizations. The findings demonstrated that this practice implemented by social work professionals is somehow in the paradigm of feminist ideology, both in the levels of knowledge and skills.

*Masculine language, name of the institute, and setting.* Language itself is not gender-neutral. Aside from the language that the workers use within the intervention process, the name of the institute and the design of the setting can inform the clients as to whether the institute is masculine or feminine.

The name and setting of the social service providing institute could be rearranged to satisfy masculine expectations. Counseling could help men to develop insights and

options, but it is necessary to consider the issues of control, fear of dependency, and fear of vulnerability when engaging men in the therapeutic process. If the male culture is regarded as unique, men's language and ways of expression should be respected.

'Family service', is often deemed to be female-oriented. Men assume that family is territory governed by females. Men encourage their wives to seek assistance instead of seeking it themselves. A setting that contains a comfortable sofa and eye-to-eye contact may not be necessary, yet a bar or a driving range setting may better facilitate their expressions.

### *Implications for future research*

*Men's research is drastically under-represented.* As noted by Chan and Chan (2000), women are regarded as the target of service development, research studies, and even practice theory establishment. There are criticisms that men's studies are still drastically under-represented, and there is still a long way to go in building knowledge and practice. To regard men as a unique culture and to establish a gender-aware social work service, men should be understood in various research practice settings such as divorce, grief, unemployment, mental health, parenting, help-seeking behavior, media and gender stereotyping, the influence of masculine beliefs, and the differences that result from men's socio-economic status and ages.

*The narratives of helping professionals.* The narratives of helping professionals provide the reflective lens through which to view the needs of the clientele. Social workers' reports regarding women's needs have been widely discussed (Brooks & Hinton, 2003; Campbell, 2006; Wilsnack & Wilsnack, 1991). This study drew on the research done on the needs of women, but extended it to the study of men's needs using the accounts of the workers in the helping professions.

By consolidating opinions on service provision to men in Hong Kong, we could compare them with accounts from different Chinese communities such as Taiwan and Macau. Furman *et al.* (2005) conducted the first comparative studies on the reports of social work professionals in the UK and the US regarding the needs of diverse cultures, which often included issues of religion and spirituality. Their concluding recommendations for integrating religion and non-religious spirituality into social work curricula and practices could positively inform an expanding international consciousness among social workers in Europe and North America, as the global phenomena challenges the profession to define its worldwide role. In line with this thinking, the comparison of the accounts of social workers in different Chinese communities has implications that may serve to foster a practice that is more suitable for men.

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