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Chinese culture, social work education and research

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Abstract

In the development of indigenous social work knowledge in China, the power relationship between teacher and student can act as barrier to the development of scientific knowledge and practice research. Social work education and practice research in Chinese societies should focus on the empowerment of social work students, methodological pluralism, and the development of a culturally specific practice research model.

Chinese culture, social work education and research

Social work is receiving its blossom growth in Mainland China. With the increasing more undergraduate courses in social work, the first master of social work course has been launched in Shanghai in 2001 with the collaboration of the University of Hong Kong and the Fudan University. The degree is aimed to provide a professional training in the theory and practice of social work in Mainland China. Development of indigenous social work knowledge that can inform practice in a particular Chinese social and cultural context is of paramount importance in the development of social work in China. Research-based indigenous knowledge is well recognized as a foundation of the professionalization of social work. A wide range of research methodologies, from quantitative to qualitative inquiries, has been adopted to develop theoretical and practical knowledge. However, the incompatibility of Chinese culture and scientific inquiry is seldom addressed. This paper will bring the discussion into focus and suggest ways in putting the social work research into Chinese context.

The incompatibility of Chinese culture and scientific inquiry

In the development of social science knowledge in Chinese society, the emphasis of knowledge building has long been placed on practical or tacit knowledge (Zeira and Rosen, 2000) rather than theoretical knowledge which is predominated by positivism (Evans, 1976; Leonard, 1975; Pilalis, 1986). Traditionally, being moral and practical have been the main themes of Chinese teaching. Under the influence of this practice-oriented and people-centered philosophy in Chinese culture, a researcher would participate in people's lives and so develop an in-depth understanding of their suffering. Knowledge was generated through participation, observation, and contemplation. Thus, the wisdom of seniors was highly valued because they had rich experience of living. The seniors would convey their wisdom and knowledge of living by telling stories about historical events or virtuous people. Oral history was a prominent method of teaching, especially in Chinese medicine and for problem solving in daily life. Closely supervised by a mentor, students learned how to deal with problems through modeling. Moral engagement was emphasized among Chinese people. The educated people were expected to commit to the making of a better living and fighting for the underprivileged.

In view of the inadequate development of scientific knowledge, the use of the scientific method, such as quantitative research, is drawing a lot of attention. However, there are

characteristics of teaching and learning in Chinese culture that are incompatible with the spirit of scientific inquiry.

1.   The power relationship between teacher and student

Knowledge building is a process of learning, negating, and generating. Before new knowledge can be generated, one has to learn, query, or even negate old knowledge. Knowledge is mainly transmitted through teaching. How the learner views the learning process and defines the roles of learner and teacher would greatly influence the capability to generate new knowledge. In Chinese societies, the teacher-student relationship is hierarchically determined which would be detrimental to the knowledge building.

a.   The monopolization of knowledge by the authorities

Chinese culture is authoritarian-oriented and hierarchically structured (Yang, 1995). Among the Five Cardinal Relations described by Confucius (the *Wu Lun*), three namely those between sovereign and subject, father and son, and an elder and younger brother, are structured hierarchically. The Chinese people are oriented towards finding their place in the hierarchy (Bond, 1991, p. 36). As one Chinese proverb puts it, "juniors and seniors have their ranking". The power positions of individuals are fixed. Respect and obedience to the

authorities and to seniors is regarded as a virtue. The wisdom of the seniors is viewed as a valuable experience that should be kept through generations. The legitimacy of knowledge is owned and defined by the authorities and by seniors. Respect of seniors would be over-emphasized than the challenge of out-dated knowledge.

b.   "Never criticize your teacher"

The hierarchy of teacher and student is defined by *li* (rites). As a student, "to respect the teacher and to honor truth" are the two golden rules. According to traditional Chinese values, a teacher's role is highly respected, as he or she owns knowledge and truth. Challenging a teacher's ideas is deemed to be impolite. There is a coherent stereotype of Chinese students that they display an almost unquestioning acceptance of the knowledge of the teacher or lecturer (Biggs, 1996). In a study carried out in Hong Kong, it was found that Chinese students respond to teachers with attention, silence, and fear. They do not question teachers or even challenge their judgments (Bond, 1991). If a student shows disagreement with a teacher, it would be treated as a personal attack and a sign of disrespect.

c.   Disrespect of student: less room to try out new ideas

The status of teacher is overemphasized in a way that students do not receive adequate respect on their creativity or innovations. The teachers are expected to have experience and wisdom. It is difficult for them to accept students' ideas, especially when the ideas are opposite to theirs. Experience is valued much more than creativity. Room for the students to try out new ideas is limited. Until they take up teacher's role, they will not be able to implement their ideas.

2. The mode of Chinese teaching

a. <u>Reserving knowledge to maintain status</u>

Respect from students is fundamental for a Chinese teacher to maintain dignity and status and to perform the teaching role. The effective way of gaining respect from students is for the teacher to show that he or she is more knowledgeable than the students are. Traditional teachers may reserve some of their knowledge or experience so that their dignity and status can be maintained. This results in a contraction of knowledge. Knowledge, then, cannot be successfully expanded through such a hierarchy-oriented relationship between teacher and student.

b.   Using metaphors rather than abstract thinking

Practical knowledge is highly valued in Chinese societies. In one study comparing the cognition of Chinese and American students, it was found that Chinese performed high in "practise skills" (Liu, 1986). Chinese tend to think in a concrete rather than a conceptual way. In Chinese teaching, using stories to teach what is right and what is wrong is common. It is mainly through stories that moral messages are conveyed. Another means of transmitting such messages is animation. Typical is the use of 12 animals to represent years. Each animal represents a different type of character. As most Chinese live in a rural environment where illiteracy is common, the traditional form of knowledge generation is mainly through the observation of nature and the association of concepts with familiar animals. The consolidation of experience through story telling is still the dominant mode of knowledge building and an important means of teaching in modern Chinese societies.

c.   Teaching moral standards rather than critical analysis

Acting and living according to a strict moral code of practice is strongly emphasized in Confucian teaching. Interest in knowing how is greater than interest in knowing why. As Confucius put it, how can we know about death before we know about life? He focused on how to live rather than on finding out what life and death are. A look at the cognitive style of

Chinese people reveals that the Taoist's fatalism is dominant. This involves attributing success or failure to fate or luck (Crittenden, 1996), and so prevents people from further investigating the causes of social phenomenon.

3.   The mode of Chinese learning

a.   <u>Avoid risk taking</u>

Chinese people are socialized to pursue individual morality. Under the guidance of *li*, they are conscious of their performance and judgment from others. Doing things right and proper is important, otherwise they will feel a loss of face if they fail. The culture discourages trial-and-error experimentation (Bond, 1991, p. 24). Chinese students tend to avoid taking risks by trying out new ideas. Too much consciousness regarding their performance and judgment from others would discourage people to be creative and adventurous in knowledge building.

b.   <u>Blind following -- adaptive learning strategies</u>

Under the pressure of avoiding risk taking and the overemphasis on respecting teachers, Chinese students become blind followers of traditions and authority because they are expected to follow teachers' instructions. This is detrimental to the development of new

knowledge. In modern society, human behavior and social problems have become complicated to an extent that cannot be explained by the traditional knowledge developed in agricultural societies. More studies on social phenomenon that could help understand the complexity of the changing society are required. The attitude of blindly following greatly discourages the motivation to find a new perspective for the interpretation of social facts.

c.   Memorization outweighs creativity

Knowledge is transferred through teaching and learning. In the Western mode of teaching, the main focus is put on the development of creativity, while the Chinese method of teaching focuses on memorization. Chinese students are expected to memorize the classics. In ancient China, advancement was based entirely on examinations and the only subject in the curriculum was classical literature. Today, as can be seen with examinations in Hong Kong, students are required just to recall text instead of analyzing it. The "model answers" are rigidly defined without considering the variability of students' answers. Even for the aptitude test given to primary school students, the answers are strictly defined. This greatly reduces the creativity of students.

4.   The adaptive function of knowledge

If the main purpose of research is to create knowledge, we have to first ask what kind of knowledge the Chinese want to create and what sort of problems they want to solve through knowledge building. Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes the development of wisdom and individual morality (Wu and Tseng, 1985). Practical knowledge is implicit in the Confucian doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action (Cua, 1989, p. 209). As China is basically agricultural, real life experience and practice wisdom are more important than abstract knowledge. Chinese farmers are more concerned with doing rather than knowing. Knowledge, in their context, should be practical in order to deal with problems that arise from natural disasters. In the development of the self in the Confucian tradition, practicality is one of the major characters of a functional person who is oriented toward reality and who is practical, flexible, and adaptable in life (Tseng, Qiu-Yun, and Yin, 1995).

In Western societies, the main purpose of obtaining knowledge is to control, manipulate, and change the natural and the social worlds. Positivism is the dominant paradigm that guides research themes and methodologies. In contrast, the Chinese hold a harmonious attitude towards nature. This is in line with their common daily sayings, such as "man's prediction never wins over Heaven's prediction", "those who follow the sky will be prosperous and those who are against the sky will be diminished" (Tseng, Lin, and Yeh, 1995, p. 10-11). Interest in developing knowledge does not stem from a desire to change nature but to adapt to

the natural environment. Even in adverse situations, Chinese people learn to endure and accept. Therefore, practical knowledge is functional to help Chinese people understand the changes of the environment and so make better adjustments.

5. The value of non-professional intervention

Social work is a helping profession. It deals with people's problems and helps them to become capable of solving them. Social work intervention research always focuses on the effectiveness of intervention and therapeutic factors. In Chinese society, informal helping is valued, especially when formal social services are not well developed. An attitude of helping is regarded as more important than practical skills. Scientific study of intervention effectiveness and the process of change has not been carried out very much. Thus, practice research has received less emphasis.

As discussed above, part of Chinese culture is incompatible with scientific inquiry, which demands abstract conceptualization from experience, careful and objective examination of hypotheses, challenges to orthodox knowledge, and the building of new knowledge. Although Chinese people carry out a lot of experimentation to improve practice skills for solving daily problems, there is little scientific inquiry. Practical knowledge and experience lack generalizability and predictability.

A new era of social work education and research

With the growing development of social work education in Mainland China, social work is becoming a professional discipline. Integration of the Chinese and Western approaches of helping is an important agenda for social work education. In the development of professional helping, non-professional or informal helping plays a significant role in social services. Whether the helping is professional or not, the therapeutic elements and the change process of clients should be studied. Practice research and program evaluation is an important tool to find out what works in the helping process. In order to build up an indigenous theory of helping, some recommendations on social work education and research are proposed based on the above discussion.

1. Empowerment of social work students

Social work educators have the important tasks of teaching research methods as well as empowering social work students. To prevent students from becoming blind followers, the power relationship between teacher and learner should be changed. To be a social work educator, one should be open to critique. The teacher should not personalize critiques and should treat different opinions as a way of examining his or her own limitations. No one,

including the teacher, knows the truth. In social science especially, research is not about judging whether something is right or wrong but rather it is about expanding knowledge and understanding of complicated social phenomenon. It is necessary to create an environment in which students can try out new ideas and develop their creativity as they set research agendas, dream up innovative designs, and make novel interpretations of data. Empowering students to be critical social scientists is an important task of a social work educator.

2. Methodological pluralism

The integration of qualitative and quantitative research in the building of theory is recommended. Chinese researchers can employ both research approaches and expand their repertoire of research skills. The quantitative inquiry method can be used to survey the needs profiles of specific target groups and to prove the effectiveness of intervention. In the formulation of a research agenda, the theoretical knowledge developed in Western societies can be used to form a hypothesis for understanding human behavior and intervention models. Such a hypothesis can be revised through the observation of indigenous practice and the practitioners' practice wisdom. The qualitative research methods can be used to build up an in-depth understanding based on personal experience.

3. The development of a culturally specific practice research model

Having examined the Chinese cultural elements that would influence social work education and research, the need to develop a culturally specific practice research model should be addressed. Based on the authors' experience of doing practice research in Chinese society, a preliminary attempt to develop a research model is outlined below.

Regarding the impact of Chinese culture on research, Chinese people's perceptions of a researcher and their concern to save face have a significant effect on the process of the research interview and the quality of the research data collected. It is especially significant for men who are very conscious of the need to save face and put across a masculine identity. Men seldom talk about their personal feelings, whether in public or in private. If we want to study men, what is the appropriate context for men to disclose their vulnerable side or talk of their socially undesirable behaviors? They may not be so expressive at home, they are conscious of the need to maintain authority; while in a social context, they are keen to maintain a competent image and seldom talk about their family problems. In an interview context, their presentations may be affected by their perception of the researcher and their concern to save face.

The relationship between researcher and subject has to be carefully examined. The idea of a non-intervening relationship between a researcher and his or her subjects is a myth.

According to self-presentation theory, people try to present themselves to themselves and to others in the most positive light (Schlenker, Dlugolecki, and Doherty, 1994). The presence of an interviewer has a significant impact on the subjects' presentation. If they have carried out socially undesirable behaviors, such as violence against women and extra-marital affairs, they would tend to use strategies to protect themselves from being blamed. The researcher may be perceived as an educated person who is representing the normative views of the society. Awareness of the researcher's role would bias the subjects' presentation which is a process of negotiation and self-representation. Development of trustful researcher-subject relationship and a context that facilitates expression of views, the subjects would be free to disclose their vulnerabilities and painful experiences. They are less likely to use narrative strategies to cover up their socially undesirable behaviors and thus the quality of data can be enhanced.

Conclusion

In the knowledge building process, it is necessary to eliminate cultural elements that are incompatible with the use of scientific inquiry, and retain the strengths of Chinese culture in order to develop an indigenous method of inquiry. It is hoped that the above discussion contributes to the development of social work education and research in Mainland China.

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