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SNIPPET

CUTTING-EDGE APPLIED RESEARCH

IN THIS ISSUE

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Dr. Rosaleen Ow (Reviewing Editor)

How quickly time moves on. Snippet 2023 is now at Issue 2.

The first article by Pek Jie Hui and his colleagues from South Central Community Family Service Centre addresses the long-held question on how far casework, groupwork and community work could be theorised and practiced outside the confines of the classroom. It presents a succinct description of a qualitative study on community centric practice (CCP) and thoughtful reflections from the findings for enhancing future CCP strategies in the local context.

The second article is a thought paper by Ivan Woo examining psychoanalytic approaches in understanding grief and bereavement. For students and practitioners working in this area, the article provides a scholarly summary of stress, coping and meaning making strategies developed mainly outside the Asian context. The question on whether such non-Asian developed psychoanalytic approaches could be directly transferred to working within Asian cultures and naturalistic philosophies about life and death such as that of Zhuangzi and qi-naturalism is discussed. This question related to the processes of 'indigenisation' or 'authentication' of theory and practice would certainly provide some food for thought to academics, practitioners and policy-makers in the local context.

Happy reading!

The Boons, The Banes and The Bridge of Community-Centric Practice (CCP): Bridging the Dichotomy of Community Participation and Casework Interventions

by Pek Jie Hui (Social Worker), Denise Liu (Former Senior Research Executive) and Ruth Tan (Executive Director), South Central Community Family Service Centre Ltd.

Keywords: Community-Centric Practice (CCP), Community Involvement, Service User Participation, Community Social Casework

Preface

This first part of this Snippet article heavily references and reproduces the research design, featured key findings and substantial portions of the research paper, titled “Community Involvement in Casework Interventions: The Boons and The Banes – A Qualitative Study” (Pek et al., 2022). In the second part of this article, we have penned down our reflections about implementing CCP in casework post-research at the agency scale. Through sharing these reflections, we invite practitioners, researchers and interested parties alike to ruminate on the journey in bridging casework and community work practice, as well as the opportunities and barriers presented throughout this journey.

Introduction

Case Management Practice in SCC

South Central Community Family Service Centre (SCC) is a community-based social service agency (SSA) in Singapore that provides support to low-income and vulnerable families, via casework provision and counselling services as well as other programmes. SCC encourages community ownership and co-creation of ground-up initiatives to meet the needs and challenges of families. Through adopting the Asset-Based Community-Led Development (ABCD) approach (McKnight & Russell, 2018), SCC aspires to mobilise individuals, associations, and institutions to come together to realise and develop the assets of the community.

Literature Review

Internationally, casework and community work have been seen as separate and dichotomous practices, with different philosophies, emphases and objectives (Goldsworthy, 2002; Hardcastle et al., 2021):

Casework	Community Work
Work with individuals	Work with communities, society
Micro-level intervention	Macro-level intervention
Case management & clinical practice	Advocacy

In addition, social workers are influenced by their organisation's and funders' priorities and positions on the role of community work, especially in large agencies where emphasis tends to be on individual work that is more easily quantified and managed (Forde & Lynch, 2014). Even when agencies endorse community participation, they may not be prepared to allow the community to participate in decision-making. Often, agencies limit their role to that of community consultation rather than participation (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Organisations may not be ready to change the way power is shared with the community (Goldsworthy, 2002), or community members may not be adequately supported when decisions are made (Goldberg, 1995).

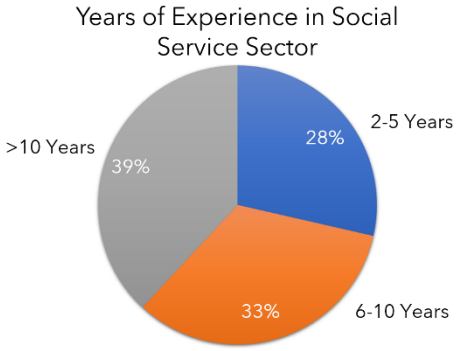
In the Singaporean context, The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and other government agencies have increasingly recognised the importance of community development in social work in recent years. In 2022, MSF published the Family Service Centre Code of Social Work Practice (FSC CSWP) Community Work Practice Guide co-developed with practitioners in community-based agencies as a "reference when planning and conducting community work" (MSF, 2022, p. 3).

Nevertheless, in the existing literature there is a clear dearth of knowledge and research examining the use of community-centric approaches within the context of casework in Singapore. Moreover, SCC adopts the ABCD approach and recognises that the principles of ABCD should also be implementable in casework. Hence, we embarked on a qualitative study to examine the challenges and enabling factors practitioners face in adopting community-centric practices (CCP) in casework.

Research Method

Participants

All SCC staff working directly with members[1] were recruited for this study. In total, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted between February to April 2020. Participants included 13 social workers, four community workers, and four hybrid workers[2] who were involved in both social work and community work. Most participants (18 out of 21, 86%) had social work qualifications, and more than half (14 out of 21, 67%) were female. All participants had at least 2 years of experience working in the social service sector (see pie chart below).



[1] In SCC, we refer to individuals receiving casework and counselling services as "members" instead of "clients".
[2] Hybrid workers have both case management and community work in their portfolio.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person by a researcher and interns who were not involved in direct work with community members. Interns who assisted with interviews and transcription did not interview their supervisors or other staff who were supervising their work. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. Consent was obtained for participation and audio-recording of the interviews, and participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary.

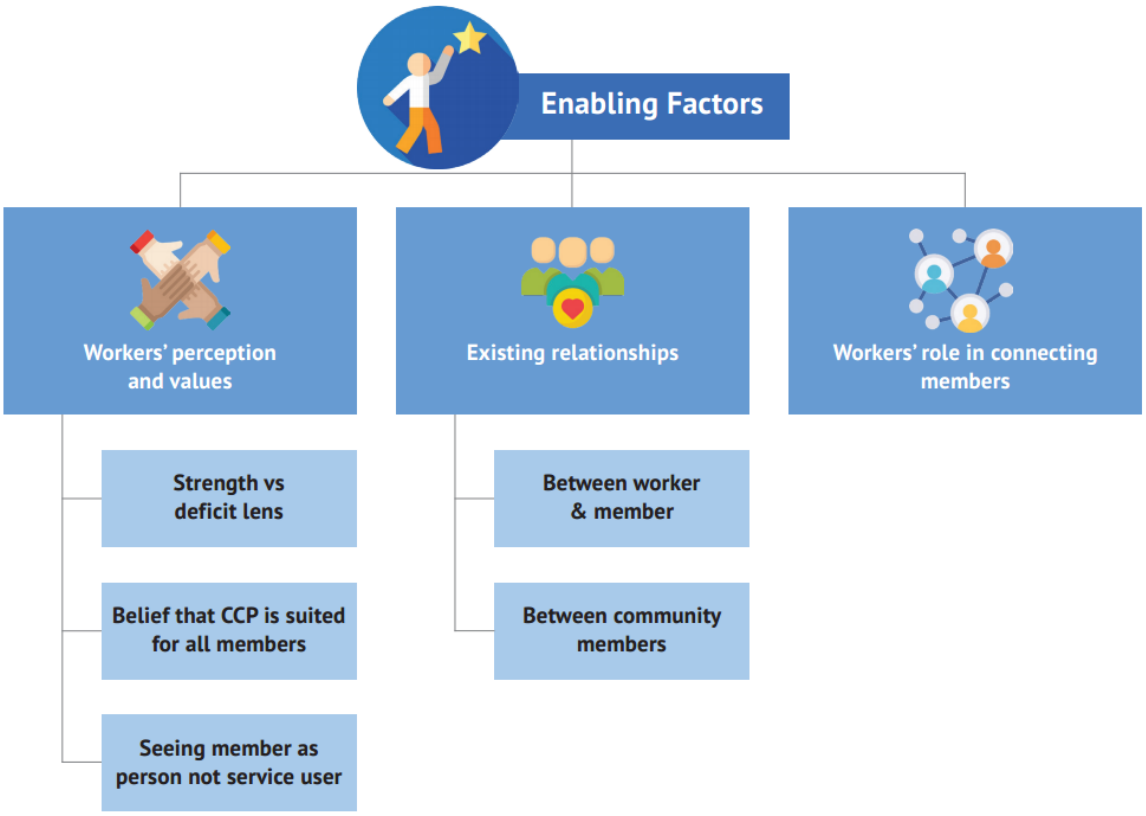
Analysis

All three project team members (two social workers and a researcher) analysed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Dedoose qualitative analysis software was used to code the data according to themes based on the interview guide. After the first phase of primary-cycle coding, a codebook was developed to define each code, and ensure inter-coder reliability (Tracy, 2013). Two transcripts (nearly 10% of transcripts) were coded by all three coders to ensure that the codebook was applied consistently, and all discrepancies were discussed to agreement.

Key Findings

Selected findings from the study will be presented in this article. For the full research findings, please refer to Pek et al. (2022); its link is presented in the references. The main themes of the findings are (1) the challenges practitioners face in adopting CCP in casework, (2) enabling factors of CCP and (3) suggestions to strengthen CCP.

Enabling Factors



Featured Enabler 1: Strengths versus deficit-based lens in social work practice

The various perceptions of workers can enable the use of CCP in casework. The strengths perspective in social work practice posits that members be seen in the light of their talents, possibilities, values and aspirations within the individual, family, or community context (Saleebey, 1996). Social worker Q speaks of the importance of seeing members as potential contributors and thereby identifying their strengths, rather than as mere recipients of services:

> If you feel that member comes in with a problem, then you will be deficit-based. But if you see member as potential contributor to the community or future prime minister, that means you will be able to see this person as a person of potential. I guess the way we work with them would be different... How we do things also stems from how we perceive things.

Featured Enabler 2: Hinging on existing relationship between social worker and member

For some workers, the crux of CCP is essentially relationship building. They believe that strong rapport between member and worker is the basis of case management and crucial to the formation of the worker-member therapeutic alliance. According to social worker W, without the strong member-worker relationship CCP cannot be executed:

> How much time we want to invest in building relationship? Because to me relationship is like windows software/OS. A laptop no windows software, you want to load your game, accounts software, excel, word etc. cannot load ah – there's no window, no software, no OS. OS is the relationship... what's missing is time invested into building of relationship.

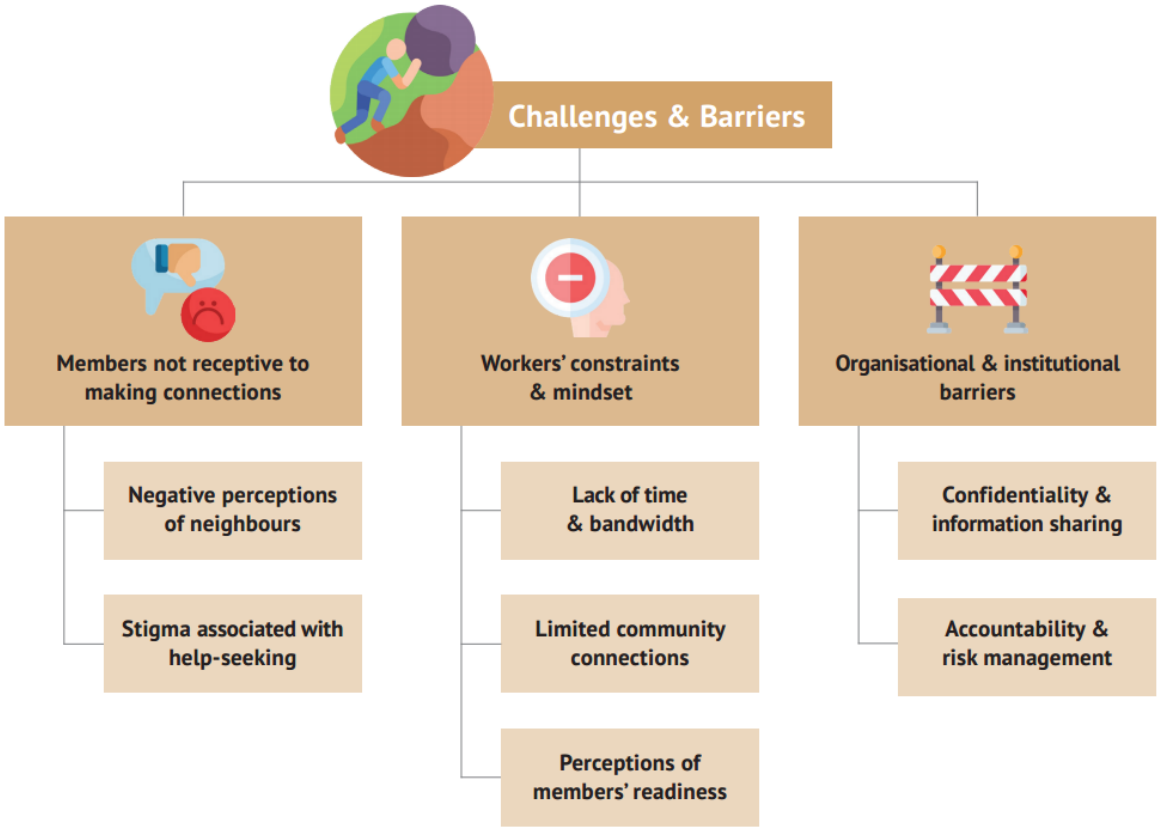
Featured Enabler 3: Worker's active role in connecting members

Some workers attempt to actively take on the brokering role and introduce members to each other in the hope that they connect informally. Several examples were given through the interviews. Featured here is one example cited by social worker F showing how two social workers collaborated to successfully bridge their own members for caregiving support:

> There was one case, [social worker's] member and my member… [social worker] asked for a neighbour who can bring food to a member who just gave birth. My member agreed. She brought her food for the next two weeks every day. She only committed for two weeks but after that she needs to go for employment.

Evident in this example is also the fact that social workers respected the member's availability of time and resource to provide support for another member (a period of two weeks in the case of the above example).

Challenges and Barriers



Featured Challenge 1: Members' Negative Perception of Neighbours

Some members were not willing to make connections as they did not trust their neighbours and were not connected to their communities. When members do not trust their neighbours with personal matters, they are less inclined to approach them for help. Social Work W felt that workers needed to be cognizant of members' comfort and trust levels before encouraging connections:

> We [Social Workers] only think how to link to community, informal [networks], ABCD [principles], but we never address these people's concerns like, I'm a single mom…. I got suicide ideation. You know, some suicide ideation cases, they don't want to let their neighbours know, scared their neighbours go and tell other people.

Featured Challenge 2: Social Workers Lack Time and Bandwidth

When workers do not have the bandwidth and time to engage the community, they struggle to build meaningful relationships that are necessary for community-centric practice. As J, a social worker highlighted, community workers spent a lot of time outside office hours engaging the community, which social workers found challenging to do as their night shifts are allocated to seeing cases:

> Our [community] workers always do the work after office hours… Night shift we will see cases. So then how? And the relationship is not built [by seeing members] once every 2-3 weeks. You must see them regularly.

Social workers also tend to focus more on “fire-fighting” – stabilising and managing cases with higher risk – which takes time and focus away from relationship-building and other community-building activities. For example, H, a Hybrid Worker, saw her community work as “secondary” because she spent most of her time in crisis mode, “firefighting” high risk or crisis cases.

Featured Challenge 3: Accountability and Risk Management

Workers were concerned about risk management or potential negative consequences that could result from linking members to their community. T, a social worker, shared that as a social worker in charge of the case, she would be liable to MSF if the outcomes of a linkage she made were negative:

> The thing is, if member to member they identify, they link, make their own connections it’s different… if it’s other form of help like collecting letters that’s different from taking care of a child. Because it is a vulnerable individual or individuals there. So if anything were to happen and linkage is through an organization, in this case, it’s a social worker from an FSC, then I’m liable for that. If touch wood, anything happens then I’m answerable most importantly to the child and child’s parents.

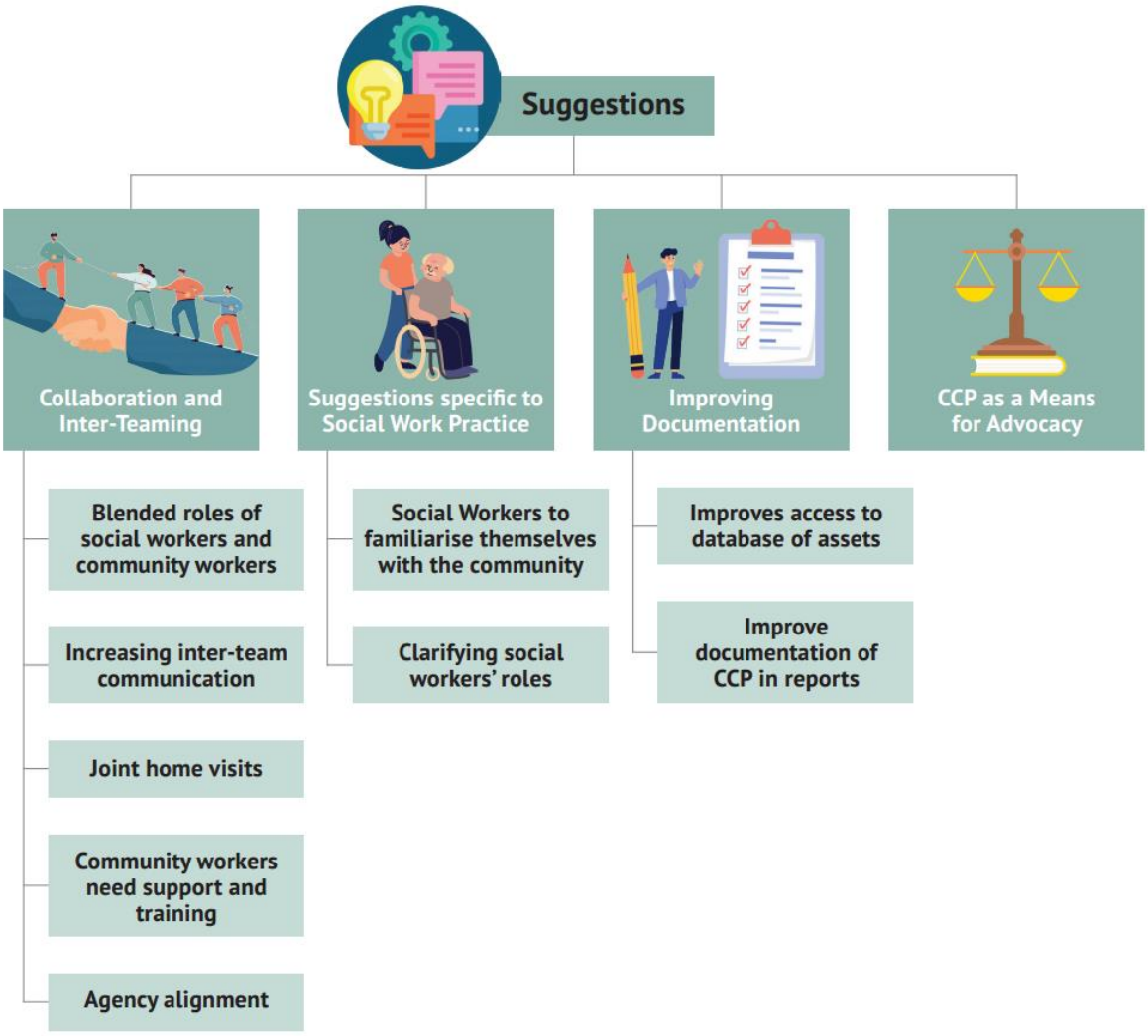
Workers were worried about having to play the role of mediator and having to manage issues that could potentially arise when members are introduced to each other. E, a social worker, was particularly concerned about the need to screen community members to determine their suitability, before introducing them to her members:

> Sometimes [when we] link up then a lot of disputes, then who is going to come in to intervene? If I do it, I have to be very mindful that the resource is very stable… It’s just like foster parents. MSF must have interview and know that they are suitable. So, community members you also need to know them, need to know if they are okay to be child minders. If they have their own kids. Firstly, I need to know if they have the bandwidth and all that.

In general, social workers had fewer concerns about accountability when they referred their members to other social service agencies or organisations. This drives workers to be inclined to case manage with formal resources rather than informal community resources.

Suggestions

Apart from the challenges and enablers, we have also distilled suggestions provided by the interviewees to strengthen CCP in casework.



Featured Suggestion 1: Blended roles of social workers and community workers

Workers have suggested venturing beyond the distinct roles of social worker and community worker. Community worker K is calling for workers to look beyond their agency-prescribed roles and approach cases as a team:

> Don't take [the case] as a caseworker [and think] I have 40 cases. But as the team here, how do we service the 580 [open cases]? It can be a collaboration between anyone. But do we see that?

Additionally, community worker B suggests collaboration between social workers and community workers should begin when members first approach the FSC for information and referral (I&R)[3]:

> From the time from I&R when this member come in after assessing can you bring in any of the community workers to talk about this to have a kind of orientation on what is block 5, doing besides just case managing. Or what else we do in the community so things are being introduced to us... And talk like eh, there's food ration happening in this neighbourhood you know.

Featured Suggestion 2: Social Workers to Familiarise Themselves with the Community

We discovered significant concern regarding social workers' lack of knowledge about the community and their lack of visibility within the community. This poses as a barrier against social workers who want to execute community-centric practices. Social worker M, posits that CCP is not achievable if social workers are unfamiliar with the community:

> To me it is a bit strange when we want to be [CCP] when a lot of our social work team don't do community walk to know neighbours... Because [for CCP] we need to take it beyond casework level, need to physically know the community. Cannot depend only on the [community work] team.

Featured Suggestion 3: Improve documentation of CCP in Reports

Documentation requisites play an important role in influencing workers' assessments. At present, the various domains of the Assessment and Care Plan (ACP) in Social Service Net (SSNet) – where workers formally document the case plan – do not require that community-centric practices or assessments be documented. Documentation requirements thus have to evolve to support the CCP work that workers carry out. Social worker T suggests that CCP should be documented as well:

> How is [CCP] documented in SSNet? Because the reality is, assessment is our administrative function. Then for me, it's also to support worker's assessment and intervention skills… you also need to study how this information [is documented] in the SSNet system... I have not thought of it. But if you are looking at this (strengthening CCP) might as well look at that (documentation) as well. Because we do so much work but sadly it is not documented.

Conclusions and Implications

Reviewing Community Social Work Practice and its Goals

The findings highlight that SCC workers believe casework and community work are not dichotomous. Workers generally see great value in collaboration between social workers and community workers. Moreover, our findings also suggest the value of reviewing the intervention goals of social work in the community setting. Workers' efforts to connect members to each other for community self-help essentially strives towards expanding members' social capital and empowering communities. If these goals have a greater weight in the outcome measures, intervention will shift accordingly to achieving these goals.

[3] This is the preliminary phase of engagement where workers provide consultation and assess whether a social worker should be assigned to the member for continued case management

Rebalancing Power between Worker and Member

It is paramount to deliberate the role (or emphasise pre-existing roles) of social workers who are executing CCP. Apart from the prescribed roles by the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW, 2017), workers' roles could be expanded to that of rebalancing power and facilitating co-solutioning with the community. Suggestions on how this can be done is provided in our reflections below (see section on "Striving to be the Useful Outsider").

Structural Changes to Facilitate CCP

With regards to information sharing, clear guidelines on community member-related information sharing between social workers and community workers would have to be standardised in accordance with the Personal and Data Protection Act (PDPA). This is because social workers and community workers interface with community members at different platforms and circumstances, which might then allow them access to different information about members. For more effective collaboration between social workers and community workers in supporting community members, guidelines for information sharing must be stipulated clearly.

On the issue of risk management, social workers reflected feeling unsafe and unsupported in delegating responsibility to community members to support other members because of the culpability of the worker if unforeseen problems arise during the process. It is recommended that the sector and agency management develop risk management guidelines in situations where members support one another, so that social workers are more supported to facilitate community self-help.

Post-Research Reflections and Future Directions

Deepening CCP Practice at All Frontiers

This segment documents our reflections surrounding our journey to strengthen CCP within SCC, and how the findings from Pek et al. (2022) have informed casework practice at SCC. In the spirit of mutual learning and cross-exchange of knowledge, we hope that these reflections could provide inspiration for our colleagues in other SSAs.

A Balancing Act: Embracing the Community-Centric Approach in Social Work Practice

Positioning & Lensing of the Practitioner

The findings from Pek et al. (2022) reflect an undisputed acknowledgement that practitioners see great value in the collaboration of casework and community work because they are interdependent. Therefore, if practitioners could orient their perspective to see *"families not as needy, but as needed (integral to communities)",* then this brings forth the question of "*how can we do casework unless we do community-centric work*?" This frame shift from viewing members through the "d*eficit-lens*" to the "a*bundance-lens*" might help workers to shift away from technocracy. This is also informed by Pek et al. (2022) which reported "the importance of seeing members as potential contributors and thereby identifying their strengths" (p. 12) as an enabling factor of CCP.

Embracing CCP as Dynamic and Evolutionary

In reality, community-centric practice and community work are dynamic. Families and communities are ever-evolving as they progress through their family life cycles and associational life changes, hence the level of contribution and commitment by members of families and communities are marked by continuous change.

Some practitioners might question if CCP is a suitable approach for all cases given that all families are unique and some could present with more severe risk concerns than others. We believe that CCP is a generic approach that can be applied to all cases, but "the effectiveness of CCP varies across time for any given case due to the changing context of the case" (Pek et al., 2022, p. 13). The practitioner should hinge upon professional assessment to discern a suitable time to introduce community partnership vis-à-vis tapping on formal resources (for instance, other SSAs or government agencies).

One qualifying point to add about the dynamism of CCP, is that practitioners should anticipate managing conflict amongst community members while executing CCP. Just as families are not spared the rod of conflict, so are communities. We should be cognizant of how such conflict sits with us and how we could also leverage on conflict as an opportunity to facilitate conversations alongside community members toward a better communal life.

Striving to be the Useful Outsider – Rebalancing Power and Facilitating Co-Solutioning with Community

Practitioners who contemplate community-centric work often ask these common but important questions:

- How do we get members to be open and ready to receive support from their neighbours as they might be hesitant to receive informal help?
- What are some specific actions to take?
- How can we show up as "useful outsiders" to facilitate community connections?

Let us start with "what is strong", instead of "what is wrong". We can begin by enhancing worker's relationship with the community members whom they are already working alongside in casework to deepen and strengthen the CCP muscle. This proactive interest to discover the existing assets and connections already intrinsic in families and communities is a starting canvas for workers to begin asset mapping. Concurrently, workers can also familiarise themselves with the community and the place-based context in which their casework families exist. Casework and community work are of equal importance and inter-connected. Both should be done in tandem.

Other suggestions to rebalance power and co-solution with the community can include active consultation and involvement of community member(s) with regards to the agency's programmes and services (and even on issues external to the agency!). It also does no harm to encourage community members to co-lead or lead initiatives which they are passionate about, rather than impose on them what we want them to do or lead. Ever heard of forced friendships? Just as friendships take time to harness and build, members who are connected and attuned to their communities also need the "tender loving care" (a nurturing space) to develop their confidence and capabilities to co-lead initiatives. If the community initiative does not eventually work out, we should also accept and embrace the efforts by community members.

A piece of homework for readers, if you may, is to ponder on "how do we frame questions that facilitate relocating power by leveraging on the strengths of what members already have?" Readers can also refer to Goldsworthy (2002) for their plethora of suggestions on how communities can be involved in agency processes.

Trepidation - Addressing Practitioners' Fears in Forging Community Connections

Often, practitioners express valid worries and fears about "what is going to happen" if connections between their members and the communities result in a bad aftertaste or "lead to abuses in relationships between members of the community". This trepidation can lead practitioners to shy away from building potential connections between members and their communities.

We see this positive hesitance coming from a well-intended space in wanting to ensure the safety and safeguard the interest and wellbeing of their casework families.

Navigating trepidation is akin to discernment between who owns the issues at hand and knowing which muscle to exercise. Risk and needs are present everywhere just as assets and strengths are everywhere too. Practitioners have to navigate between the ability to exercise both the casework muscle simultaneously with the community-centric muscle. They should also do this as a team, through a process of cross-consultation to generate ideas, and simultaneously look out for potential "blind spots" where safety of members could be compromised.

For example, a single mother who lives with her four young children in a neighbourhood with high prevalence of drug use may decide (well intently) for her children to not be connected with a suggested neighbour. At the same time, it may also be otherwise safer for her to discover other like-minded mothers who share the same sentiments in wanting to ensure a safe environment for their children living in this neighbourhood, so that they could discuss potential methods of keeping their children safe. This is a selling point and connecting opportunity for community members to embrace community connections.

What is critical in facilitating connections formed within the community is respecting the agency of community members in owning that connection. What this essentially means is that "workers' efforts to connect members to each other for community self-help essentially strives towards expanding member's social capital and empowering communities" (Pek et al., 2022, p. 18).

Anabranch[4]: Agency Support to Reconverge Casework and Community Work

Agency's Role in Nurturing the Growth of CCP

Colleagues in managerial positions of SSAs may wonder:

- How can we support community-centric practice in my agency and also encourage and support my team of workers in doing this?
- Where and how should we start?

We believe that one tiny but powerful first step to start is by gently holding spaces in the agency to have conversations where workers can safely express their views on community-centric work. What this suggests is to invest in building and co-creating a culture of CCP where workers can share, discuss, ideate, and ultimately to involve members over time into a co-created space.

Assuming the agency's readiness to support CCP is present, Goldsworthy (2002) expressed that "community-centric approaches also require the worker to have enough time and bandwidth to reflect upon existing practices and make changes to the status quo, and to participate in community development activities. When stress levels increase, workers may end up reverting to original practices and their positions as experts" (Pek et al., 2022, p. 5). Given that bandwidth is often a competing factor, the management could consider designating official time and space for workers to familiarise themselves with the communities and conduct asset and resource mapping in the community. For example, a starting point can be carving out some dedicated weekly time for practitioners to get to know the community and convening to share their learnings in a collective space.

[4] An anabranch is a stream that leaves a river and later re-enters the river further along the course.

Agency-Led versus Agency of Members

Earlier we shared about the practitioner's role in facilitating connections formed within the community and respecting the agency of community members in owning that connection. A further reflection is how can agencies consciously relocate and shift power back to members and their communities in areas that can be positively empowering and meaningful for members? Valuable points of reflections then could be:

- How much does your agency lead (agency-led) versus how much do members or communities have the opportunity to lead or co-lead?
- How much community leadership would your agency eventually like to see and shift towards?
- What actions (however small) can help to achieve that?

Coming up with answers to those questions can empower balancing and reconverging "agency leadership" with "agency of (community) members".

He who Pays the Piper Calls the Tune: Recommendations for Resourcing

From the perspective of resourcing, some may be concerned that with the years required to build the assets and connections in the community, how can this approach be advocated as a sustainable way in the future of FSC work?

The proverb *"he who pays the piper calls the tune"* resonated when workers express the dilemma between wanting to do more CCP versus the competing demands of conventional casework intervention. Questions often shroud around the aspirations of a more encouraging funding that can enable and support community-centric approaches. Perhaps future discussions can deepen around looking at a more proportionate and holistic bespoke funding approach that might help FSCs to be more enabled and encouraged to take on CCP as a sustainable approach. Instead of investing in more programmes and services, we can consider investing in the communities to become part of the uplifting equation. It is after all, our members' community, not ours. Agencies could consider investing to develop or groom community connectors and animators[5] to lead their own communities, so that the community development is sustained even when members exit formalised helping systems, or when practitioners exit the agency.

Co-creating a Continued CCP Pipeline at SCC: Future Directions

We conclude this article with some residual reflections about our development of a CCP guide at SCC, which hopes to act as a gentle guiding handle for workers to feel more confident to embrace the CCP journey ahead. Along that learning journey is also the conscious effort to continue documenting stories of practices which embody CCP. These stories also serve to detect the growth and sustained impact of social and community connections on members and their families' functioning. In the journey to deepen spaces in CCP, we continue to actively identify and discover more assets present, be more inclusive to our members (not only the ones we prefer) and to leverage on the existing relationships in their neighbourhoods. We hope to continue to scaffold the work towards enlarging the voice and spaces for contribution from our members, their families and their communities as active producers and drivers of change.

[5] Community connectors are community members whom have relationship with a significant number of members of the community, and can engage them for community initiatives. Community animators develop and implement community initiatives alongside connectors.

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Towards a More Holistic Understanding on Bereavement

by Ivan M. H. Woo, PhD, RSW, Principal Medical Social Worker, Department of Care and Counselling, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, Singapore.

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Keywords: Bereavement; Holistic understanding; Theories; Psychoanalytic; Naturalistic

Key takeaways from the article:

1. John Bowlby's attachment theory has started debates among bereavement scholars but there are questions on the validity of the theory in bereavement studies.
2. Cognitive stress theory has contributed much to understanding on coping with bereavement but it does not provide one with a full understanding of the experience.
3. Meaning reconstruction theory is useful to put into perspective the process of meaning-making among bereaved individuals but may not hold for bereaved individuals in the Asian context.
4. Other than the psychoanalytic view, there can be a naturalistic view to grief in bereavement influenced by Chinese agrarian philosophy.
5. It is worthwhile exploring if the lack of grief reactions during bereavement is suppression of grief, a psychoanalytic perspective, or an appreciation that death is just part and parcel of life, a naturalistic perspective.

Historical Background

There are many theories, opinions and research on the topic of bereavement and this can be confusing for people who are new to the topic (Parkes, 2011). However, existing scholars are in agreement that the beginnings of bereavement studies can be attributed to the works done by Sigmund Freud, Eric Lindemann and John Bowlby (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009; Rubin, Malkinson, & Witztum, 2012). Many scholars have pointed to Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* as an important piece of work that has created an interest in grief and bereavement. Freud's central thesis is that grief work should aim to help bereaved individuals detach themselves from the dead person. He claimed that memories and thoughts related to the loss are to be confronted continuously and pathological grief happens when either one is avoiding grief work or one has conflicting feelings with the dead person (Archer, 2008). Eric Lindemann built on Sigmund Freud's work by tapping on his clinical experience with individuals who were bereaved suddenly and traumatically and contributed much to our understanding on traumatic grief and crisis intervention with bereaved individuals (Rubin et al., 2012). Bereavement studies became more exciting when John Bowlby introduced attachment theory to the community of bereavement scholars.

Contrary to Freud's claim that a bereaved individual needs to detach thoughts and memories associated with the loss in order to move on in life, Bowlby asserted that while grief reactions can be abnormal, it is normal for one to maintain an attachment with the deceased (Archer, 2008; Rubin et al., 2012). With this opinion raised by John Bowlby, a debate arose in the field of bereavement studies that led to the rich pool of opinions and empirical studies in contemporary times.

Attachment Theory

Since the publication of the first volume of John Bowlby's Attachment and Loss trilogy (Bowlby, 1969), much work had been done using attachment theory to inform research on bereaved individuals. The final volume of his trilogy (Bowlby, 1980), published eleven years after the first volume, provides an overview of Bowlby's thoughts on how attachment theory can explain the experience of a bereaved individual. The statement that best sums up the explanation provided by attachment theory to account for the experience of the bereaved would probably be: "the goal of attachment behavior is to maintain an affectional bond, any situation that seems to be endangering the bond elicits action designed to preserve it; and the greater the danger of loss appears to be the more intense and varied are the actions elicited to prevent it" (Bowlby, 1980, p. 42). When applied to the bereaved, the loss of a loved one threatens the preservation of the affectional bond between the bereaved and the loved one who has passed away. Reactions of the bereaved are thus ways to prevent the loss of the bond. This belief developed from attachment theory is the key contributor to the development of the concept of continuing bond, referred to as the presence and connection with the deceased maintained by a bereaved individual (Silverman & Klass, 1996).

***Strengths and limitations of attachment theory*.** John Bowlby's thoughts created a paradigm shift in how people looked at bereaved individuals and his opinions started debates among bereavement scholars that resulted in a rich pool of knowledge. However, there remained questions on the validity of the theory. When it was first developed, it was based on observations made of children's behaviours towards their mothers by researchers with no inputs from the participants of the research. Also, when it was generalized to adults, it was assumed that attachment patterns developed during childhood remained relatively stable over time, an assumption that might not be true given that scholars in positive psychology found evidence to support the view that people could change when they go through bereavement in their lives (Znoj, 2006).

When attachment theory was first developed by John Bowlby, he was of the view that individuals with insecure attachments tended to have disordered mourning (Bowlby, 1980). However, there was another subsequent study that caused one to rethink the assumptions held by Bowlby. Fraley and Bonanno (2004) conducted a study to test the assumptions made by John Bowlby. They found that while it was true that individuals who were fearfully avoidant, an attachment pattern associated with poor opinion of self and others, struggled to adjust to the loss of a loved one, those who were dismissingly avoidant, individuals with good opinion of themselves but poor opinion of others, could be resilient in bereavement (Fraley & Bonanno, 2004).

When concluding their study, the authors proposed that dismissingly avoidant individuals' resilience could be due to (1) their lower likelihood to experience strong emotions and, (2) their tendency not to form strong attachment bonds with people. This was an interesting finding which suggested that the attachment theory introduced by John Bowlby might not apply to all bereaved individuals.

Cognitive Stress Theory

In addition to attachment theory, cognitive stress theory, developed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), also caught the attention of bereavement scholars because it could explain the difference in how bereaved individuals coped with losses. It was believed that coping, a key concept in cognitive stress theory, was an important mediating variable in the relationship between bereavement and stress (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010).

Prior to the introduction of cognitive stress theory, the concept of stress was first introduced in the physical sciences in the 14th century (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Keen interest in the concept of stress was developed in the social sciences when anxiety received much attention from the social scientists. In the early days, social scientists were inclined to use behavioural theories to explain the concept of stress, specifically theories from stimulus and response psychology. Stress was perceived as a stimulus that resulted in a certain response in an individual. The early scholars of stress theory also asserted the need to look at the relationship between the person and the environment as a stimulus that resulted in responses in individuals. Over time, scholars of cognitive stress theory prefer the term “coping” to “responses”, probably because the former term suggested potential for taking proactive measures to manage stress while the latter term suggested a sense of helplessness when faced with stress.

Forms of coping.

In their seminal work on coping published in 1984, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two main forms of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is like problem solving except that problem-focused coping, unlike problem solving that focuses mainly on the environment, also gives attention to the individual person. The main aim of emotion-focused coping is to manage emotional distress.

As researchers continued to study the concept of coping, it was argued, towards the end of the last century, that there was a need for a new form of coping: meaning-focused coping. Like problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, the concept of cognitive appraisal is central to meaning-focused coping. Meaning-focused coping is an attempt to integrate the meaning we give to our more lasting values and beliefs (global meaning) with the meaning that we obtain from the interaction between our circumstances and our belief and values system (situational meaning) (Park & Folkman, 1997). If a bereaved spouse has little difficulty integrating the global meaning with the situational meaning, the perceived stress of spousal loss is minimal. However, if a bereaved spouse were to experience great difficulty integrating the global meaning with the situational meaning, the perceived stress of spousal loss will be great, creating a desire to reconstruct meaning to cope with the impact of the loss.

Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) reviewed 35 years of scholarly works on coping and highlighted that seeking support had also become an accepted factor of coping in recent years. They termed this form of coping as social coping. In the same article, the authors identified future-oriented proactive coping as a form of coping with much potential for future development. Future-oriented proactive coping refers to coping that adopts strategies to manage in advance the impact of anticipated events. Another form of coping that the authors feel has potential for exploration is religious coping. However, they have highlighted that religious coping can gain greater recognition only when future scholars are able to sort out some complicated conceptual issues, one being the fuzzy boundary between religion and spirituality.

It appears that the concept of stress has been around for a long time even before the birth of cognitive stress theory. Perhaps the key contribution that Lazarus and Folkman (1984) added to the wealth of knowledge on stress is the concept of cognitive appraisal. According to the theory, when one faces a stressor, an appraisal of the stressor will be activated in the

mind. This cognitive appraisal is the beginning of the coping process and is separated into primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. It is the cognitive appraisal of a stressful event that will determine how one copes with the event. Primary appraisal is an appraisal on whether an event is stressful and secondary appraisal is an evaluation on the adequacy of existing resources to manage the stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

***Strengths and limitations of cognitive stress theory*.** The cognitive stress theory was well thought out and it certainly had contributed much to our understanding of how people cope with the stressors that come with bereavement. However, the concepts of stress, cognitive appraisal and coping are only useful in providing us with an understanding of the mediators in an individual's bereavement experience, thus disallowing a full picture of the experience. A mediator "accounts for the relation between the predictor and the criterion. Mediators explain how external physical events take on internal psychological significance" (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1176). For example, it was believed that bereavement (predictor) would result in poor adaptation (criterion). However, when one takes into consideration stress, cognitive appraisal and coping as mediators of the relationship between bereavement and adaptation, the relationship is no longer significant. Instead, it is the levels of stress, the appraisal of bereavement and how one copes that would predict adaptation to the loss of a loved one.

Also, while the theory recognizes the need to take into consideration the relationship between the individual and the environment, the focus placed on cognitive appraisal has also meant that less attention has been given to the transaction between an individual and the environment.

Meaning-focused coping is a term that has been around for nearly three decades and researchers have used it to help them understand the experience of bereaved individuals. However, it is limited in its scope given that it draws its assumptions from the cognitive stress theory developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). It gives one the impression that meaning is a psychological concept, something that can be constructed by the mind, when contemporary literatures have suggested that spirituality, a concept that has meaning as a key element, is also important in helping one adjust to bereavement (Park & Halifax, 2011; Rubin et al., 2012). While one can construct meaning in their mind, some meaning that is experienced in life cannot be comprehended by the mind. For example, a person can derive much meaning from sipping a cup of tea and when asked to describe the meaning, will find it difficult to offer a description of the experience.

Meaning Reconstruction Theory

Meaning reconstruction theory that recognizes social construction of meaning, when first introduced to bereavement scholars, seems to hold much promise in addressing the limitations of studies informed by cognitive stress theory. The origins of meaning reconstruction theory can be traced back to Victor Frankl's pioneering work on meaning (Frankl, 1959) that resulted in an exponential increase in the interest on meaning-making in the field of death, dying and bereavement. In his classic book titled "Man's search for meaning", the late psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camp, asserts that "man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives" (Frankl, 1959, p. 99). It also states that meaning is unique to each individual and everyone must take personal responsibility in exercising their will to meaning. He also believes that life itself will require every individual to find the meaning in life. Thus, the motivation to search for meaning is intrinsic. Should one see a therapist with regards to a need to search for meaning, Frankl holds the view that the therapist's role is in broadening the perspective of the client, in order to make available possible meaning that the client can draw from within for support. According to logotherapy, the therapeutic approach developed by Frankl to help people search for meaning, there are three ways to discover one's meaning in life.

First, one can create a piece of work or engage in a deed. Second, one can either go through an experience or an encounter with another human being. Last, one can discover meaning through the attitude one takes towards unavoidable suffering.

According to the meaning reconstruction theory, bereavement is a crisis in meaning and it involves an individual trying to conserve, as much as possible, the things that still make sense and construct new meanings to replace any old meanings that have failed as a result of the loss. In the meaning reconstruction theory, it is believed that complicated grief is a manifestation of impairment in reconstructing a meaningful reality, usually among people with insecure attachment styles and living in vulnerable relationships (Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002). It is important to note that not every loss will result in a reconstruction of meaning. It was asserted that one would only make sense of one's loss if that loss had life significance, defined as "the assignment of value to a goal, relationship, or aspect of life experience that exists or is pursued in the present and future" (Hibberd, 2013, p. 679). Meaning reconstruction theory also states that it is useful to focus on the context and narrative processes when one is studying meaning-making in the context of loss (Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002). Three independent but related aspects of meaning reconstruction have been identified. They are (1) making sense of the loss, (2) finding benefit from the experience and (3) reconstruction of one's identity (Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002).

(1) ***Sense-making.*** Sense-making is believed to be important in early adjustment to loss for it helps the bereaved individual find some answers to the question "Why?" With the answers, one will have an explanation that will sustain an individual for a short period of time.

At the individual level, when one loses a spouse, a key attachment figure, one possible way that the bereaved spouse can make sense of the death or engage in meaning reconstruction is to perceive the death as fate or the will of a higher power. For example, some Chinese will claim that a loved one is fated to die at a young age while Christians and Muslims will assert that the death is according to the will of God.

At the family level, the bereaved spouse may believe that disruption of the key developmental tasks is an attempt by a divine being to strengthen one's character. Studies have found that the inability to make sense of the loss is predictive of complicated grief symptoms during bereavement (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2006). It is also interesting to note that maintenance of strong continuing relationships with the deceased is traumatic and distressing only when the bereaved individuals are unable to make sense of the loss in personal, practical, existential or spiritual terms (Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006).

(2) ***Benefit-finding.*** With time, a healthily adjusted bereaved individual will revise their answers as they continue to search for significance in their losses. Neimeyer and Anderson (2002) identified literature that found benefit-finding useful in contributing to the long-term adjustment of bereaved individuals.

At the individual level, the bereaved spouses may realize that the death of a spouse has helped them better appreciate their surviving loved ones. Disruptions to the key developmental tasks have helped them acquire skills and knowledge that they might not pick up if their spouse were still alive. Studies found that higher levels of benefit-finding were associated with lower levels of complications in bereavement (Neimeyer et al., 2006). However, it is interesting to note that one study found that higher levels of benefit-finding are associated with poorer grief outcomes if sense-making is high (Holland et al., 2006). It is only when sense-making is low that benefit-finding will help a bereaved individual adjust to the impact of the loss. This finding by Holland and his colleagues appeared counterintuitive. When they reviewed the informal interactions they had with the research participants, they found that people who used religious terms to make sense of their losses were offended at any suggestion of finding benefits from the loss of a loved one. For these people, being able to make sense is sufficient. Benefit-finding may be perceived as an attempt to profit from losses due to divine interventions.

(1) ***Identity reconstruction.*** In the context of identity reconstruction, it is believed that bereaved individuals will relearn about the self as they continue to make sense of the post-loss world they live in. Identity reconstruction is often perceived as an outcome of the process of grieving (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006) and thus would be an unconscious process. Often, it was in retrospect that bereaved spouses reported that they discovered they had taken on some of the traits of the deceased spouse and became a changed person. In the family, the bereaved spouse started to take on roles that the deceased spouse used to take and became both a father and a mother to their dependent children. A previous study also found that an ability to perceive positive change in identity is associated with lower levels of complications in bereavement (Neimeyer et al., 2006).

The studies cited above on the three aspects of meaning reconstruction seem to suggest that while the three aspects are associated, a bereaved individual does not need to have all the three aspects of meaning reconstruction to adjust well to bereavement. This therefore supports the view that sense-making, benefit-finding and identity reconstruction are independent but related domains.

Narrative processes.

Regardless of the context of loss, according to meaning reconstruction theory, it is through stories that people organize the various events in their life and find some meaning from putting the events in perspective. Three possible narrative processes have been identified. They are (1) external narratives, narratives that contain concrete description of an event or issue, (2) internal narratives, narratives that focus on emotional and experiential responses in a person and (3) reflexive narratives. These processes contain an individual's attempts to analyze, interpret and make meaning of the external and internal narratives. It is through self-narratives that one can know how well one has assimilated significant life events into daily lives (Neimeyer, 2005). Self-narratives that indicate one has assimilated significant life events into daily lives tend to have greater coherence.

***Strengths and limitations of meaning reconstruction theory*.**

While meaning reconstruction theory is useful in putting into perspective the process of meaning-making among bereaved individuals, its assumption that the process of meaning-reconstruction relies on narratives may not hold for bereaved individuals in the Asian context. While narratives, folklores and metaphors have been used in Asian cultures (Lee, Ng, Leung, & Chan, 2009), it is observed from clinical experience, that Asians tend to use fewer words to express thoughts and emotions. Thoughts and emotions are expressed through activities and acts of service. For example, love for an individual with a terminal illness is expressed through efforts made to prepare nutritious food for the individual, and worries are expressed through endless search for information that will help cure the individual of the illness.

Perhaps a bigger limitation of meaning reconstruction theory is the lack of an explanation to explain how a bereaved individual can adjust to a senseless death. This limitation may be addressed by meaning management theory which is able to explain the naturalistic view of grief.

Meaning Management Theory

Meaning management theory assumes that everyone must concurrently protect themselves against the terrors of loss and death while pursuing a good life that is meaningful and abundant. Life is managed through meaning in the form of meaning-seeking and meaning-making towards an understanding of our identity, values, purpose, and how to live the good life (Wong, 2008). The theory holds as its central beliefs, that (1) humans have a spiritual dimension in them, (2) all humans are

capable of meaning-seeking and meaning-making, living in a world that is socially constructed, (3) everyone seeks to survive and find meaning for survival, (4) meaning can be found in all situations and (5) avoidance and proactivity can co-exist to bring about maximum positive motivation. It predicts that a proactive life tends to lead to a more meaningful life and the best way to alleviate death anxiety is acceptance of the inevitability of death and focus on positive tendencies.

Wong (2008), when describing the meaning management theory, has differentiated meaning-seeking, meaning-making and meaning reconstruction. He states that meaning-seeking is similar to discovery. Meaning is sought using our senses. When discovered, the meaning will offer us some predictability and control over our lives. Meaning-making, unlike meaning-seeking, gives emphasis to the construal, construction and creation of meanings. Meaning-reconstruction is the process that people engage in when there is no goodness-of-fit between the events in their lives and their assumptive world and cherished life goals.

The theory's strength lies in the differentiation of meaning-seeking, meaning-making and meaning-reconstruction, which serves as a reminder that it is important to take into consideration that different bereaved individuals will have different outcomes in their management of meaning. Some will engage in meaning-making, actively construing, constructing and creating meanings. Others will engage in meaning-reconstruction, an attempt to establish a goodness-of-fit between the events in their lives and their assumptive world and cherished life goals. A third group will engage in meaning-seeking, a journey of discovery to establish some form of predictability and control over their lives.

How then is it possible for individuals to adapt to bereavement without actively either making sense of the loss or reconstructing meaning?

Psychoanalytic Versus Naturalistic View of Grief

Existing literature on meaning tend to assume that everyone needs to make meaning of any unfortunate events in their lives (Attig, 2001; Korotkov, 1998). Meaninglessness is often associated with poor adaptation to unfortunate events. In the context of finding meaning in bereavement, individuals would need to work through their grief by looking at the factors that influence their experience and behaviors from an intrapsychic perspective. It is through an understanding of the self that one will be able to derive meaning in their experience (Payne, 2014; Rubin et al., 2012).

Other than the psychoanalytic view to grief, there can be a naturalistic view to grief. The naturalistic view to grief may have support from the naturalistic philosophy of Zhuangzi and proponents of Chinese qi-naturalism. Followers of the philosophy of Zhuangzi would tend to perceive death as part and parcel of the human lifecycle (Lai, 2006). The writing on the philosophy of Zhuangzi that best illustrates this view is the one on how Zhuangzi lived with the death of his wife. It was written that one of his students who visited him to offer his condolences to Zhuangzi after the loss of his wife was surprised to find Zhuangzi singing and pounding on a tub. The student was puzzled and questioned him on his nonchalant behaviour. In response, Zhuangzi acknowledged that he did grieve over his wife's death, but death is part and parcel of our lives, like the four seasons, spring, summer, autumn and winter (Hermann, 1990). Therefore, followers of the teachings of Zhuangzi would disagree that one would have a shattered assumption after spousal loss because they have already assumed that death is a part of life. Perceiving death as part and parcel of our lives gave Zhuangzi the meaning he needed to move on with his life.

Proponents of qi-naturalism would also agree that death is just part and parcel of life. They believe that life and death are simply various states of *qi*, defined as "a continuous form of energy that can be manifested in both material forms and spiritual forms" (Liu, 2015, p. 39). If life and death are just various forms of a continuous form of energy, death when it happens, should be accepted as a natural progression in life.

It is believed that the naturalistic philosophy of Zhuangzi and proponents of *qi*-naturalism may have developed from the lived experience that Chinese has with nature, soil and climate. The forefathers of the Chinese people depended heavily on agriculture for survival and in their interaction with nature, plants and soil, at the mercy of the climate, an agrarian philosophy might have developed with time. “Agrarian philosophy stresses the role of nature, soil and climate in the formation of moral character as well as social and political institutions” (Thompson, 2008, p. 527). Zhuangzi and the proponents of *qi*-naturalism, in their lives, may have developed their perspectives of life and death through what they had observed about nature, soil and climate, and concluded that death is just part and parcel of life.

Here, one may wonder if followers of the teachings of Zhuangzi or *qi*-naturalism can indeed experience bereavement without shattering their assumptions. From the psychoanalytic viewpoint, they could be suppressing their grief. If they do indeed suppress their grief and manage to live healthily, like Zhuangzi after the loss of his spouse, can long-term suppression of grief be adaptive, contrary to the beliefs of the psychoanalysts? Earlier, it was highlighted that researchers had found that individuals who were emotionally avoidant and defensive could be resilient in bereavement (Fraley & Bonanno, 2004). In a study involving 160 bereaved individuals in the United States, it was found that the research participants who tend to perceive death as a part of life also reported having greater sense of meaning in their lives, which predicted lower grief symptomatology (Boyraz, Horne, & Waits, 2015).

While bereavement of some individuals can be explained by psychoanalytic theories, others may hold a worldview that is more consistent with the naturalistic perspective. The presence of different worldviews means that caution must be exercised when assessing Asians for complications in grief, an assessment that has up to now been strongly influenced by worldviews outside Asia. Resolutions of tension created by differences in worldviews can be achieved if professionals supporting bereaved individuals can begin their work with an understanding of the worldview held by their clients.

A related question that one needs to ask is whether it makes sense for social workers in Asia to continue to transfer and apply social work practice models developed outside Asia and adapt it to fit their work with people in Asia, also known as indigenisation (Ling, 2014), or would it be wiser to focus on authentisation, defined as generation of “practice theory by grounding social work in the local culture” (Ling, 2014, p. 8)? This is a debate that needs to be taken into consideration as future bereavement scholars, researchers and practitioners continue in their endeavours to develop knowledge and models of practice in Singapore.

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