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# **Abstract**

## **Professional ethics and autonomy in community work secondary settings in Hong Kong**

**Ka Kui Charles Ng**

Community work in Hong Kong is a part of social work and social welfare services. Since the early 2000s, 'community work secondary settings' (CWSS) have appeared, and a professional autonomy issue has emerged. This grounded theory study aims to fill the knowledge gap by investigating this ethical issue and generating a context-specific theory that reflects how social workers in CWSS understand and exercise their professional autonomy. In this research, theoretical sampling was conducted, and its flow was influenced by a phenomenon that practitioners were worried about when using the community work approach. Two core categories, 'workers' being ambivalent in performing professional identity' and 'taking hidden actions in practice', were generated. These categories were analysed separately using Glaser's Six C's theoretical coding family and then integrated into a context-specific theory. It was found that professional autonomy issues notably manifested in two situations: 1) when workers selected their intervention methods to address clients' needs and problems, and 2) when there was a conflict of interest between funding bodies and clients. These situations were moments when workers engaged with professional ethics while facing professional identity crises. To eliminate the perplexity, workers' commitment to community work and their use of reflexivity matter. The complicated connection between values and professional activities

was theorised as a social process of the legitimacy of social regulations underpinning workers' actions in their meaningful sphere. This subtle and relational process linked professional autonomy, professional identity and ethical decision-making. This research sheds light on workers' resistance in a 'darker side of practice', illustrating when and how workers used phronesis during ethical decision-making. It also demonstrated the interplay between 'micro-ethics' and 'macro-ethics' in the studied community work secondary settings.

# **Professional ethics and autonomy in community work secondary settings in Hong Kong.**

Ka Kui Charles Ng  
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Durham University  
PhD Thesis  
Submitted 2024

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Signed

Ka Kui Charles Ng

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# **Chapter 1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction**

As a practitioner deeply involved in community work and social work, I bring a unique insider's perspective to this research. Using the grounded theory methodology (GTM), I delve into the complex world of 'community work secondary settings' (CWSS). This chapter serves to present my interest and rationale for undertaking this study, the scope of the research, and a preview of the subsequent chapters.

## **1.2 My interest in the research topic**

Over the past decade, I have always questioned whether my colleagues and I delivered a community development (CD) service. This was because other community workers constantly asked us the same question. Undoubtedly, community development is a contested term with various definitions. The answer to my question is subject to the dominant discourse of community development in the context where it is practised.

When I started supervising social work services in a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Hong Kong after fourteen years of frontline service in youth work, I was mainly responsible for the school social work service. However, owing to the limited resources of the community development division, although I needed to gain experience in community work, I was

assigned to supervise several community development projects. The situation of managerial staff supervising additional projects, sometimes beyond their expertise, on top of their original duties became common after the launch of the new funding mechanism, the Lump Sum Grant (see Chapter 2). The two types of social service teams studied in this research were also under my supervision: Social Services Teams in the Buildings Department (BDSST) and Urban Renewal Social Service Teams (URSST). These units were funded by a governmental department and a statutory body, respectively.

In 2007, the most significant urban redevelopment projects took place in Kwun Tong (a district in Hong Kong), and its designated URSST was operated by my organisation. At that time, the public and the community development sector worried if our URSST could protect residents' welfare when they had a conflict of interest with the redevelopment operator. As the responsible supervisor of the team, I was constantly questioned about whether we could exercise our professional autonomy under pressure. The question 'Did we deliver a community development service?' was asked in this context, reflecting that people's expectation of community development – empowering clients<sup>1</sup>, enhancing their participation and advocating for their rights – possibly could not be actualised in these social service teams.

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<sup>1</sup> Clients in this research are residents who are living in old urban areas; the term 'clients' and 'residents' in this thesis are used interchangeably to refer to service recipients of community work services.

My research interest in this study was born from this complex and emotionally charged backdrop. In contrast to my experience in youth work, I felt a profound sense of justice when supervising these social service teams. Our interventions directly impacted residents' interests, which could be quantified through significant compensation.

Whenever I was challenged, I asked myself if I did something wrong while being confused about right and wrong. Carrying a hybrid role as a manager and a professional, I was always frustrated when balancing managerial and professional orientation. I needed to ensure that we could meet the contractual requirements of the funding organisations, and I was also expected to recognise residents' vulnerability and respect my colleagues' professional judgement. I learned that the professional autonomy issue attached to these social service teams was a complex cause-and-effect relationship. It must have been something more, but I could not grasp it at that time.

In this grounded theory research, I am an insider researcher. During the research process, I oversaw these teams and became familiar with the service operation. My different roles in the community work sector brought me to the scenes where some critical issues occurred. Besides, I was unavoidably involved in the studied area at various levels, mainly because I conducted grounded theory research targeting a tiny sector.

### **1.3 Scope of Study**

Using grounded theory methodology, this research focuses on the professional autonomy of community workers in secondary settings. Professional autonomy is crucial to professional ethics, particularly in secondary settings where the contracted-out funding mechanism creates power relations, thereby limiting workers' intervention space. The ability of workers to advocate for residents' welfare and interests is an ethical decision, as "it involves a process of exploring values to establish where an ethical dilemma might lie and what factors take priority in the weighing up of alternatives" (McAuliffe, 2010, pp. 41-45).

In this sense, the research is about the individual application of professional autonomy, which means "the freedom of choice of the individual professional practitioner to make decisions about how to act within the framework defined by the professional group"(Banks, 2004, p. 155). Professionals would no longer be trusted by their service users if their loyalty is questioned, which would harm building rapport between workers and clients. This research focuses on micro-level ethics, mainly how workers cope with ethical challenges about their clients, colleagues, supervisors, and collaborators.

Since community work is part of social work in Hong Kong, social workers take on the role of community workers instead of an independent occupation; hence, in this thesis, the term professional ethics refers to social work ethics.

Meanwhile, the phrase 'community work secondary settings' (CWSS) used in this thesis refers to the context where the studied community work teams were located. It is a development of the concept of 'social work in secondary



settings', which means social workers work in an environment where social work is not the only or primary profession (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larsen, 1997).

The main research question at the beginning stage of this study was, 'What is going on in the complicated process by which social workers exercise their professional autonomy in community work secondary settings?'. This research aims to generate a context-specific theory that reflects the reality of how social workers in the community work secondary settings understand and exercise their professional autonomy in practice.

When I examine professional autonomy by selecting professional ethics as a theoretical starting point, I intend to ask whether social workers made morally correct decisions. There are "times when the professional ought to give conscious attention to the reasons why one choice seems better or worse than another" (Hinman, 2003, p. 5). This is a moment of 'engaging with ethics' following Hinman's thinking.

After the entire research journey, the theory generated in this research to explicate the process relating to workers' exercising and protecting professional autonomy eventually covers several significant areas, including professional identity, ethical decision-making, and the use of 'phronesis' (practical wisdom as featured in virtue ethics). In short, when workers performed their professional identity and made ethical decisions, they engaged with ethics while their professional autonomy was threatened. This was a social process legitimising the social regulations underpinning their social actions.

## **1.4 Rationale for the study**

The location of social work practice, especially within the government, can impact the space for social workers to exercise their professional autonomy since it is a significant determinant of failure to reach full professional status (Witz, 1992). The increasing number of 'non-welfare agencies' employing social work practice through contracted-out or direct employment has been a trend in Hong Kong since the early 2000s (see Chapter 2). How social workers reacted in such locations where their decisions were made under governmental influences and challenges mirrored the character of professionals since their decisions were made after considering the ethical commitment to their clients (Traynor, Boland, & Buus, 2010).

Regarding the context of this research, the core business of these funding bodies was related to urban redevelopment and building safety issues affecting the welfare of grassroots families. These funding bodies expected social workers to assist them in reaching their organisational goals. Sometimes, the interests of the funding bodies and the residents conflicted, while some policies were controversial and even perceived as unjust. Social workers' core ethical concern was how they balanced the needs of residents and the needs of the funding bodies. The alertness of every social worker who worked in secondary settings was crucial to protecting their professional autonomy. Some of them might be aware of such threats and adopt various strategies to cope with them, but the worst situation was that social workers themselves did not sense that they were threatened.

Furthermore, there was a signal that the overall environment of the social work field has been worsened for autonomous social work practice. The 'Tai O incident' (see Chapter 2), which occurred in 2009, illustrated that practitioners' professional autonomy was even threatened in primary settings. The local community development sector perceived this incident as social workers' professional autonomy was interrupted; the incident happened in a mainstream community development project funded by the government. The grievances triggered by the incident were expanded to primary and secondary settings, such as the school social work service, primary school counselling, integrated family service.

When I planned to conduct this research, I anticipated how much worse the situation was in community work secondary settings, where double loyalty to both funding bodies and clients was more apparent than other services in primary and secondary settings. As a result, there was a need to study a complicated phenomenon where professional autonomy was threatened under secondary settings.

Notably, ethical decision-making, a narrow perspective of ethics, is a starting focal point to examine how social workers exercise their professional autonomy in secondary settings. The establishment of a profession initially aims to facilitate clients' achieving a flourishing life because of their vulnerability and dependency. Hence, professionals should uphold a goal beyond their interests and be favourable to the public good. However, under the new accountability regime, practitioners' loyalty to clients is limited, and the assumptions about professional ethics are threatened (Banks, 2004).

To a certain extent, the community work secondary settings that emerged in Hong Kong were unfavourable environments for ethical social work practice. The entire process of exercising or protecting professional autonomy in these settings was undoubtedly complicated when considering their service location, the controversial policies involved, and the core mission of community work empowerment. Practitioners have underexplored this developing and complicated phenomenon, and no particular research has been conducted in the local context.

Therefore, this study aims to develop a context-specific theory on how social workers deal with professional autonomy in secondary settings, where no such theory currently exists in Hong Kong. The theory will help us understand and explain social workers' situations when their professional autonomy is threatened. It will also be relevant to developing practice guidelines for facilitating ethical practice in secondary settings in Hong Kong.

### **1.5 Outline of thesis**

Community development is part of social work in Hong Kong, and the government has funded it since the 1970s. Hence, there was a close connection between social welfare, social work and community development. This historical background directly affected the building up of the professional identity of community workers in the sense that the service mode of the government-funded programmes constructed the dominant discourse on community development in the local context. However, when workers carried this identity in delivering community work in the studied social service teams,

there was a mismatch between the service mode and the new service context. The short history and the big picture of Hong Kong's community development, as well as its dynamic and changes before and after the welfare reform, are depicted in Chapter 2. The chapter aims to highlight the positional changes of community development and analyse tensions that practitioners have faced when delivering community development services with the social work capacity.

The initial research question of this grounded theory study asked what was going on in the process where workers exercised and protected their professional autonomy. This issue can easily be associated with social work ethics. After all, social work is a profession or semi-profession. Most occupations are transformed into a profession through professionalisation. Members of specific professional groups make every endeavour to enact professionalism. Since the phenomenon studied has profound implications for workers' professionalism, including their professional ethics, professional autonomy, professional identity, and ability to use practical wisdom in their work, Chapter 3 serves to explore aspects of the relevant literature on these themes. It also examines the challenges of neo-liberal and managerial approaches to the organisation of social services, thereby providing readers with a comprehensive theoretical context that will guide their understanding of the subsequent chapters.

In the fourth chapter, I outline the background of the grounded theory methodology and explain the details of this study's operation, including research questions, sampling, data collection, data analysis, and limitations.

The challenges encountered in my role as an insider researcher is also encompassed.

Before presenting and analysing the data relating to the core categories, Chapter 5 sets the scene for analysis by introducing the pressured work contexts of the studied social service teams and illustrating all sub-categories of this research.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I first present the data of the two categories, namely 'being ambivalent in performing professional identity' and 'taking hidden actions in practice', then use Glaser's Six C's theoretical coding family to inform the analysis of the two core categories. The analysis of these two chapters can be considered part of the context-specific theory. In Chapter 6, I elaborate on how the funding mechanism produced multiple accountabilities that workers had to encounter. Owing to the low legitimacy of the community work approach in the settings, workers' identity crisis brought them into a spiral effect in which their emotions and professional identity were adversely affected. In Chapter 7, it can be seen that under the same service context, as illustrated in Chapter 6, workers encountered aporia of practice in workplaces where they had chances to use phronesis (practical wisdom), and their hidden actions were the phronetic actions (praxis) they used to resolve ethically difficult situations.

Chapter 8 integrates the two parts of the context-specific theory into one. To raise the conceptual level of the two core categories, I investigate the interaction between workers' commitment to community work and their use of reflexivity. I also borrow Satir's theory of communication to conceptualise

their coping stances in relating to authority figures under stress while reviewing their performance of ethics work. This process helps me understand that a social process of legitimacy, particularly the legitimacy of social regulations that underpin workers' social actions, is related to workers' professional autonomy condition in work settings, the original research question of this study. Consequently, the relationship between professional autonomy, professional identity and ethical decision-making is connected.

Finally, Chapter 9 summarises this study, where I address the research questions and depict the shape of the generated theory. Apart from discussing this study's benefits and uniqueness, I comment on its limitations and implications, followed by further research and practice recommendations.

# **Chapter 2 Community development service context in Hong Kong**

## **2.1 Introduction**

This research concerns community work, particularly the projects funded by non-welfare organisations and workers practising in secondary settings. As these projects are operated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and most community work services are implemented by social workers and funded by the Social Welfare Department (SWD), there is a close relationship between social welfare, social work and community work. This chapter reviews the relevant materials on the overall development of community work in Hong Kong in the past more than half a century; the aim is to highlight the positional changes in community development and analyse tensions that practitioners have faced when delivering community development services with the social work capacity.

## **2.2 Community development in Hong Kong and in an international context**

Internationally, the term ‘community development’ is used in both a narrow and broader sense. In the narrow sense, it is one approach to community work. Accordingly, community development’s “core values of acting as a liberator among the poorest in society” (Poppo & Redmond, 2000, p. 391), can be identified as follows:

1. Community development is a process of raising social consciousness that involves collective participation.
2. It promotes self-help and mutual help.
3. It aims to achieve social justice.



4. It prioritizes serving disadvantaged community groups and people with vulnerability.
5. It should be provided in a flexible and non-partisan manner.

On the other hand, while used in a broader way, “it encompasses a whole range of approaches to work in and with communities and is often regarded as synonymous with community work” (Banks, 2019, p. 7). The definition agreed by the International Association for Community Development (IACD) is an instance of a broader application:

“Community development is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice through the organisation, educations and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings” (International Association of Community Development, 2020).

Community development in Hong Kong is mainly performed by social workers because it is one of the social work methods along with casework and group work, and this positioning is widely accepted within the social work field (Community Development Service Network, 2010; Fung & Hung, 2010; Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1997). Notably, this categorization was even used in the earliest professional social work course conducted in the 1950s in Hong Kong; at that time, the three social work methods were called casework, group work and community organisation (She, 1978).

According to The Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS)<sup>2</sup>, the definition of community development written in 1986 was stated again in another community development position paper as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> The Hong Kong Council of Social Service is a federation of non-government social service agencies of Hong Kong, which was established in 1947 to plan and coordinate large-scale

“Community development is a process of raising social consciousness whereby people are encouraged through collective participation to identify, express and act on their needs. It is a community-oriented social work approach which comprises a series of planned activities with the ultimate goals of achieving social justice and improving the quality of community life” (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1997, p. 8).

Since most of the community development services are financially supported by the Government through the Social Welfare Department (SWD) and Home Affairs Bureau (HAB), community development is also one type of social service. The interpretation of community development made by the SWD is in line with the sector’s understanding of community development. The SWD states that the objective of community development is:

“To promote social relationship and cohesion within the community, and to encourage the participation of individuals in solving community problems and improving the quality of community life” (Social Welfare Department, 2019).

Although HKCSS’s and SWD’s definitions refer to the same service, community development, the former strongly emphasizes the core values of community development, whereas the latter, while not explicitly mentioning these values, focuses on the role of community development in building a cohesive community. This difference may reflect the distance between the civil and official understandings of the community development ideology.

In the early 2000s, the official definition of community development in Hong Kong was written in a governmental document. The Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) announced a policy paper for community development and its policy

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relief works and social welfare after the Second World War. In 1951, it became a statutory body under the Hong Kong Council of Social Service Ordinance, Chapter 1057 of the Laws of Hong Kong.

objectives (Home Affairs Bureau, 2005). As the community work sector was well engaged during its formulation, the core elements of this version impacted the HKCSS's updating of the community development definition in 2009 (Community Development Service Network, 2010), which was used by the sector in the following decade, during the period when this research was being conducted. However, this does not mean the NGO sector could obtain full support from the HAB regarding community work development. The relationship between NGOs and the HAB throughout the community development's evolution is ongoing and will be elaborated in section 2.6 of this chapter.

In Hong Kong, a Cantonese-speaking Chinese society, workers use the terms 'community development' and 'community work' interchangeably to refer to community development, generally aligned with the aforementioned agreed definitions continuously refined in the sector (Community Development Service Network, 2010). In this thesis, these two terms will also be used similarly.

## **2.3 The original position of community development**

The development of community work in Hong Kong has been the product of socio-political factors throughout the past more than half a century, which can be traced back to the post-World War II period. Originally, community development had two positions: a policy-driven social service and a social service with both welfare and political facets.

### **2.3.1 Policy-driven social service**

Initially, community work in Hong Kong has been a policy-driven and government-funded social service. The government had different policy concerns because of the socio-political conditions and resources inputted in community work, which varied correspondingly.

Meanwhile, due to its social work background, community development in Hong Kong is a profession. The development of social work in Hong Kong started at the end of World War II, which was perceived as a direct consequence of British colonisation (Chow, 2008; Lam & Blyth, 2014). In 1947, the Social Welfare Office (renamed the Social Welfare Department in 1958) was established to take responsibility for rolling out measures to address pressing social problems caused by the massive influx of Chinese refugees that poured into Hong Kong (She, 1978) .

NGOs have long maintained a close relationship with the Social Welfare Department (SWD), which provided them with considerable financial support (Leung, 1986; She, 1978). According to Lam and Blyth (2014), earlier in the 1980s, NGOs' activities were significantly influenced by governmental policies because over 80 per cent of their annual budgets were supported by government subvention. Although currently, resources generated from community work projects only occupy a small proportion of the overall social service organisations' annual budget, SWD, as the main funding body of NGOs, still has a significant impact on the funded organisations.

The Kaifong<sup>3</sup> Welfare Association (KWA) was the earliest form of community development in Hong Kong, established by the SWD to take up some social responsibilities related to residents' livelihoods. The growth of KWAs was a testament to their significance, with 21 KWAs serving about 250,000 people by 1954; a number that rose to 54 KWAs with about 850,000 people in 1969 (Hodge, 1972). However, the function of KWAs gradually declined as the government strengthened its role in providing education, medical services, and social welfare services.

In the 1960s, Hong Kong society was increasingly focused on understanding community development as a key element in the formation of a Hong Kong

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<sup>3</sup> Kaifong means people living in the same district, and a sense of community is implicit (Riches, 1969, p. 84) .

identity. For example, the establishment of a Community Development Committee by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS) at that time aimed to bring together individuals interested in community development to assess its relevance in the local context (Riches, 1969). Additionally, the SWD's involvement in community development was marked by a systematic approach, involving funding and monitoring of community centres. These centres, serving as hubs for a wide range of community activities, including clubs for all walks of life, friendship groups, sports and interest groups, library services and meeting places, provided a strong sense of connection to the community (Hodge, 1972; Leung, 1986).

The government's first White Paper on Social Welfare, published in 1965, emphasized the crucial role of professional intervention, to be deployed only as necessary, in supporting the most needy (Chow, 2008). Since then, community development in Hong Kong has been a government-funded social welfare service.

Because of the economic growth and the government's awareness that taking care of disadvantaged people was beneficial to social stability, according to Chow (2008), the 1970s was a golden era of social welfare development, and so community development proliferated during that period. In the 1973 White Paper on Social Welfare, the government endorsed four community development services: community centres, housing (estates) community centres, community halls, and community services programmes. (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1997; Hong Kong Government, 1973).

Noteworthy, as a policy-driven social service, the community-building policy was critical to the community development services' evolution in Hong Kong in the 1970s. The development of these community development services had a unique socio-political background. Responding to the riots<sup>4</sup> in the mid-

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<sup>4</sup> "The 1967 riots were indeed a watershed in the history of Hong Kong. The immediate trigger was the sacking of hundreds of workers by a plastic flower factory in San Po Kong in April 1967,

1960s and increasing numbers of social movements in the 1970s, the government perceived its advisory structures as ineffective. Therefore, the community-building policy was initiated in 1976 aimed at creating a caring and responsible society. The policy encompassed various types of strategies, such as setting up and supporting residents' organisations, running community centres for residents, encouraging residents to participate in community activities, lobbying the public to support the government's policies and providing district-level recreational activities (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1997; Kam & Mok, 2019). These strategies were designed to foster a sense of community and social responsibility.

Furthermore, published in 1978, the Report of the Standing Committee of the Pressure Group played a pivotal role in the subsidising of the Neighbourhood Level Community Development Project (NLCDP). This initiative, along with the existing community centres, was designed to serve as a community-building program. Again, their primary aim was to foster communication between residents and the government, providing a platform for the public to express their grievances through community development services (Kam & Mok, 2019).

Up until the 1980s, community development services operated by NGOs were generally divided into government-subsidised programmes and those supported by NGOs' own resources or other funding sources. The former included the Neighbourhood Level Community Development Project (NLCDP) and Community Centres (CC), also known as mainstream services in terms of service provision, service goals, and working methods. The latter included

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which eventually led to the worst disturbances in the history of Hong Kong. What started as a social issue resulting from a labour dispute soon turned into a political struggle against British imperialism. The protests soon developed into violent riots, and the leftists later even resorted to terrorist tactics, such as bombing and assassination. This communist-initiated confrontation, which lasted until December but produced no notable achievement, eventually resulted in the deaths of 51 people and convictions of about 2000 people" (Horiuchi, 2020, pp. 121-122).

various types of locality-based community projects and functional group projects (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1997).

### **2.3.2 The dual character of community development**

Examining the mainstream services, particularly the NLCDP, is indispensable to illustrate community development's dual character. The government started subsidising the NLCDP in 1978 to serve deprived but transient communities (temporary housing areas, squatter areas, boat squatters, and old public housing estates) where welfare services and facilities were inadequate.

Perceiving the whole community as their service target, NLCDP was politically charged by launching community organising to empower residents' collective participation in solving their community problems (Leung, 1986). Besides, community workers linked up with residents of other neighbourhood projects that faced similar problems by forming a residents' alliance to strengthen their collective power in influencing policy changes. On the other hand, in welfare service provision, NLCDP workers emphasised reaching out to residents and providing services through a wide range of flexible methods, including home visits, street stations, exhibitions, flyer distribution, mobile counselling services and telephone hotlines. These diverse approaches ensured that all residents were reached and served effectively (Kam & Mok, 2019).

Apart from being a government-funded service to facilitate community-building policies and fill the welfare gap in the late 1970s, theoretically, NLCDP can be seen as a form of pluralist community work according to the principles outlined by Popple (2006, pp. 60-61) that I have interpreted and applied them in the NLCDP context as follows:

- The NLCDP approach, with its understanding of the structural nature of deprivation, was a testament to the NLCDP workers' expertise in

recognising the political dimension of community work. This dimension was evident in the interface between politics and welfare, where resource allocation and policy implementation decisions could significantly impact community welfare.

- As the primary space where people spent their time, the neighbourhood was the focal intervention point of NLCDP. This emphasis on the localised impact of community work strengthened the vertical relationships between community groups and resource holders, fostering a sense of connection and shared responsibility.
- Community work played a pivotal role in empowering various groups to overcome the challenges prevalent in their neighbourhoods or communities. These challenges, which could range from lack of access to basic services to social and economic inequalities, were effectively addressed through the community's concerted efforts.
- It is crucial to note that NLCDP was led by a team of professionally trained social workers. Their expertise and dedication ensured the service quality and effectiveness, reassuring the community and stakeholders.

The performance of the two facets (welfare and politics) of NLCDP was first confirmed by the government in a comprehensive review on the function of NLCDP published in 1982 as follows (Committee on NLCDP, 1983; Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1997):

1. Identifying community needs.
2. Promoting mutual assistance among residents.
3. Fostering a sense of belonging to the community.
4. Developing leadership skills.



5. Promoting residents' participation in community activities.
6. Promoting social welfare services.

Needless to say, practitioners' accomplishment in addressing residents' vulnerabilities across a number of transient communities was also recognized by the review. This result facilitated further development of this model in its early stage; in the early 1990s, 52 NLCDPs were operating in different communities. Most importantly, it significantly impacted how the NGO sector defined community development. This definition, as stated in the *1986 Community Work Position Paper in Hong Kong*, published by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, was mentioned in section 2.3 of this chapter (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1997). Hence, the generation of community workers at that time deeply believed in the function of NLCDP. This belief, in turn, played a crucial role in shaping the collective perception of community development in the local context, particularly in terms of its concepts and intervention methods. Again, NLCDPs' experiences, which viewed the entire community as a service target, emphasized collective participation and upheld social justice, became significant elements of community development in Hong Kong. These elements were closely tied to constructing the community worker's professional identity.

Additionally, when considering community development workers' professional identity, the aspect of community organizing must be taken into account. As previously mentioned, the political facet of community development involves applying community organising work in practice. Since the late 1970s, social workers in community development services have typically functioned as community organisers, equipped with confrontation skills to pressure government officials to enhance the living conditions of grassroots residents (Hodge, 1972; Lam & Blyth, 2014).

In Hong Kong, community workers who adopted a conflict approach saw community organising as vital to community development. This orientation,

which local community workers might have inherited in the 1970s, was influenced by experiences from student movements in other countries. However, a significant influence on the adoption of confrontational strategies was Alinsky's two books, *Reveille for Radicals* (1946, 1969) and *Rules for Radicals* (1971), which were widely read by practitioners and inspired the use of confrontational strategies (Fung, 2017; Lam, 2011; Leung, 1986).

Furthermore, NLCDP performed a ventilation role to facilitate the government's communication with residents. Leung (1986, p. 6) pointed out that "most community workers were enjoying a substantial degree of autonomy in engaging into the work of resident organisations and issue-politics ..... and the government had neither formally recognised nor disapproved of this type of work since social actions organised by NGOs at that time were too mild and piecemeal to support of a radical ideology and climate".

On the other hand, in the other mainstream service, community centre workers also employed empowerment as their core approach. They organized residents to protest against government policies, facilitate community participation, and uphold community empowerment, although the government's purpose was to utilise community development for community building (Fung, 2017; Fung & Hung, 2010).

Therefore, overall, community workers, with their shared goal of empowering service users, have been using a conflict approach to drive policy changes since the 1980s (Wong, 1989). The effectiveness of this approach was evident in different levels and scales of policy changes it has brought about in the sector. Wong (1989) thinks that as resources were allocated to NGOs for social programmes, the government, while not totally agreeing with specific teams' conflict approach, lacked the means to regulate the projects. This led to the widespread adoption of the conflict approach in the community work sector.

Emphasizing the workers' interpretation of service ideals, it is clear that they have a significant degree of autonomy and decision-making power. This autonomy, coupled with their use of a practice approach, is instrumental in delivering community work services to enhance residents' participation and reach the empowerment goal, thereby demonstrating their active role in shaping the services.

## **2.4 Force leads to change - welfare reform with neoliberalist agenda**

In 1991, the government conducted another review of NLCDP and concluded that it could only concentrate on poor transitional communities to provide the required welfare services, although this service model positively impacted community building (Kam & Mok, 2019). Eventually, in 1995, the Home Affairs Department (HAD) proposed a gradual reduction of NLCDP, which provided services only in the priority such as squatter areas, housing estates, rural suburbs and specific types of housing redevelopment areas. Officially, the government thought those original transient communities served by NLCDPs had been largely replaced by public housing estates, while social welfare services had seen basic improvement; the government, hence, decided against introducing new NLCDPs (Office of the Ombudsman, 2021). Consequently, after the rapid growth and a stable service environment in the 1970s and 1980s, NLCDP was diminishing by the early 2000s (Fung & Hung, 2010). In 2019, 17 teams were still operating, only one-third of its size at the peak period (Kam & Mok, 2019).

Nevertheless, NLCDP's reduction of resources was just the beginning of a series of changes in the community development landscape. Since 2000, the HKSAR government has been guided by 'new public management' principles, leading to a series of reforms in social welfare services. In linking up relationships between international, national and local, Popple (2015)

perceives neo-liberal economics and politics as one of the factors that influenced community work. These reforms, driven by a neoliberalist agenda, particularly the pervasive trend of managerialism, have introduced more 'market-oriented' principles (Fung, 2017). The adoption of principles including economy, efficiency, effectiveness, market, management, and measurement promises to enhance the efficiency of welfare provision, while emphasizing cost efficiency and output-based accounting (Chui, Tsang, & Mok, 2010). Clarke (2007) thinks of different ways neo-liberalists employed aim to subordinate social policy to economic policy and to form a unique and complex intersection between political economy and governmentality approaches to current transitions.

From the government's perspective, this shift in management principles could offer reassurance for the future of social welfare services (Nip, 2010).

Among all measures of the welfare reform, first of all, the subvention reform, particularly the Lump Sum Grant (LSG) and the service reform have the most direct impact on the community work services. In 2001, aiming to improve cost-effectiveness, flexibility, and public accountability, the government introduced the LSG as a funding mechanism for social welfare services run by NGOs. One of the significant changes was that the SWD only subsidized mid-point salaries of staff members instead of reimbursing full pay as previously (Fung, 2017; Lam & Blyth, 2014). As a result, NGOs were encouraged to redeploy their human resources to deliver social welfare services cost-effectively and better cater to the community's needs. A survey conducted by the HKCSS found that under the LSG, agencies' tendency to employ staff on short-term employment contracts also weakened the staff members' sense of job security, long-term career planning and continuity of service (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2006).

According to SWD, 164 out of 171 subvented NGOs voluntarily switched to the LSG funding mode as of March 2010 (Nip, 2010). In other words, about 99 percent of NGOs subsidized by SWD were under the LSG mechanism (Nip,

2010).

The LSG established a new contractual relationship between the government and NGOs, which were assigned to meeting service outputs, outcomes, and quality standards, thereby altering the traditional dynamics of service provision. Therefore, the relationship between the government and NGOs changed from a partnership to a ‘funder and service operator’ relationship (Lam & Blyth, 2014). After the launch of LSG, evidence showed that workers practising in mainstream community development projects had to make changes—workers’ direct service provision adopting a consensual and mutual help approach increased significantly, whereas the number of social actions taken decreased (Fung, 2017).

Secondly, the impact of the welfare reform on top of the LSG was a basket of NPM policies that directly and significantly changed the NGO sector’s ecology through the government-organisations system and, in turn, impacted practitioners’ daily practice. As aforementioned, the relationship between the government and NGOs was transformed into a contractual relationship as the government’s attempt to contain welfare expansion and control over the non-profit sector (Lee & Haque, 2006). Additionally, the government commenced using a system of competitive bidding in services for NGOs to compete for government service contracts. This has spurred intense competition among local NGOs, which consequentially turned out to be a divisive strategy that further undermined the non-government sector’s unity (Lee, 2012). Trust, a crucial element in fostering collaboration and mutual respect, between NGOs has disappeared as they have become competitors in the bidding exercise for new services. Furthermore, the trust between the NGO’s management and the frontline workers was adversely affected because sometimes their service goals were incompatible regarding the agency’s development versus the client’s interests and welfare. Finally, the government’s control of NGOs was powerful and straightforward (Lai & Chan, 2009).

Summarising the complex impact made by the LSG as mentioned above and other NPM policies in the welfare reform, these measures could be further categorised as one of the subordinations, namely ‘economising the social’ – “welfare is constructed into a contractual relationship, producing individuals who think of themselves in economic terms as entrepreneurial, calculating selves whose world is structured through contractual or quasi-contractual relationships” (Clarke, 2007, pp. 976-977).

Furthermore, in the context of service reform, the government envisioned re-engineering family services that would transition from fragmentation to integration, and from centre-based service to outreach and networking. The government saw this shift as a positive step, promising improved efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery (Nip, 2010). In the early 2000s, the SWD proposed merging the Community Centres (CC) service, another CD mainstream service, with the Integrated Family Service Centre (IFSC), which targeted families in need as the primary service users rather than perceiving the whole community, as emphasised by community workers (Wong, 2010, p. 110). IFSC, which covered the entire territory, played a crucial role in providing a continuum of preventive, supportive, and remedial services. These services were designed to adapt to the changing needs of families, providing reassurance that the system is responsive and flexible. This integration was justified by the need to use public resources more efficiently and rationalise service delivery modes. The CD sector strongly rejected this proposal and took a series of social actions to safeguard the profession.

The aforementioned historical context has revealed that community development in Hong Kong, originally as a policy-driven service with welfare and political facets, underwent a significant repositioning between the 1990s and the early 2000s. Regarding the repositioning, firstly, there has been a move from a policy-driven social service to a funding-driven social service. To survive, NGOs had to accommodate the requirements of various funding bodies. That means they might unavoidably need to adjust the programme

design at the expense of core values of community development. For example, in 2000, the government established a Community Investment and Inclusion Fund (CIIF) to support community groups and set up short-term community projects to establish and promote regional social capital. In a broad sense, projects granted by the CIIF were counted as doing community work utilising networking and empowerment. Since CIIF was under the Labour and Welfare Bureau's (LWB) governance, the government has used these vast resources to address the CD sector's request for new projects. However, all CD projects subsidised by the Fund were time-limited, two to three years. Besides, since operators needed to reach high service outputs, there was no room for CD practitioners to play an advocacy role done by CD practitioners. Additionally, since CD was a diminishing service that lacked new resources from the government, operators had to appeal for support from well-established local charities, which played a pivotal role in supporting NGOs to launch pilot CD projects before obtaining regular government support. Significantly, the continued organisational development of the NGOs has depended on their success in winning contracts through the competitive bidding system. A study by Fung (2014) shows that under the bidding mechanism, several NGOs were deeply concerned about avoiding jeopardising their relationship with the government, as they described the system as highly non-transparent in its operations.

Furthermore, having been a funding-driven service, CD has gone from a service with a dual character (welfare and politics) to a sole character (merely welfare) because the room for implementing community organising and conflict approach is increasingly limited. Additionally, CD, as an individual service that targeted the community as a whole, has been changed to an approach that targeted individuals and families. This kind of understanding was influential to funding bodies' granting criteria. Fung and Hung (2010) believed the role of community development had been repositioned to assist the government in attaining welfare support missions to needy groups, provided that the government no longer supported 'standalone' community

development services, which previously committed to facilitating community empowerment for the welfare of disadvantaged communities.

In fact, the reasons for the mentioned positional changes were multiple, occurring over a decade since the early 1990s, in which we have identified some milestones of Hong Kong's social and welfare development. Finally, it is worth to mention a critical milestone in social work professional development. The Social Worker Registration Ordinance (SWRO) was introduced in 1997 (Lai & Chan, 2009), although it was not critical to CD's repositioning. Under this ordinance, using the 'social worker' title by non-registered persons was illegal, and all practitioners who used the title of 'social worker' needed to be registered by the Social Worker Registration Board (SWRB). This is because establishing the social worker's registration system has slightly impacted the community development position and the worker's role in delivering community development services. Its influence was not as direct and vital as anticipated. There has been a suggestion that the newly established code of practice might act as a gatekeeper, preventing social workers from taking radical social actions. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, most workers in the community development mainstream services were focused on empowerment work. It was unlikely that registered social workers would take radical social action, given the majority of social workers in mainstream services did not apply a radical approach.

## **2.5 Funding, power and community development**

The relationship between funding, power, and community work is a critical aspect that demands our attention when examining the tension between rendering community work and the social work capacity. In both local and global contexts, funding arrangements are a significant concern for community development, particularly for those services or projects that lack stable resources from public or private sources (Finnegan & McCrea, 2019).



After 1997, the government played a more predominant role in the NGO sector. In addition, welfare reform has significantly impacted the independence and autonomy of social work professionals in delivering services to their clients.

Although the NGOs concerned only had a small number of community work projects funded by the government, under the LSG policy, NGOs needed to maintain good relationships with the government to secure more government funding for new projects other than community work projects.

Politically, the turning point of 1997 guided the entire HK society towards building a stable and harmonious society. These core values became embedded in the societal fabric, creating a subtle expectation for various funding bodies (governmental and non-governmental). This expectation significantly impacted their selection of suitable organisations for receiving funding.

Consequently, NGOs were under considerable pressure to maintain a mild image and secure funding from various sources. The fear of being deemed radical by funding bodies led to a shift in their approach. This new funding regime affected the performance of professional practitioners in their duties and significantly impacted the daily delivery of social services by agencies, thereby undermining professional autonomy.

In this research, the funding bodies and NGOs represented different sides, each with their own needs and perspectives on principles, aspirations, understanding of community work and work processes, and outputs and outcomes. The critical issue was whether NGOs could work against the funding bodies' interests when the welfare of their clients was adversely impacted, raising significant ethical concerns.

Furthermore, funding bodies typically took the lead in operating, monitoring, and renewing service contracts. NGOs, often in desperate need of funding, might be tempted to adjust their goals to fit the expectations of funding bodies. However, the real challenge for NGOs was to align their objectives with the

funding source while steadfastly maintaining the integrity of their work, a crucial aspect of ethical practice in this field (Finnegan & McCrea, 2019).

Discussions of funding are concerned with questions of power, purpose and the interrelationship with broader economic and political developments. Funding also connects communities, practitioners, the state, NGOs, corporations, and other social institutions. Power relationships created and mediated within funding relationships can influence ideas and practices relating to organisational management and professional areas. Based on these premises, Finnegan and McCrea (2019) argue that funding functions as a connective tissue within power configurations, which can govern and shape the theory and practice of community development.

On the other hand, the tension created by the positional changes of community development was a complex issue that related to the ambivalence of social workers in employing the community work approach and upholding its values in practice. This discussion delves into the intricate nature of workers' professional identities. Community workers' choices of work strategies revealed their differential conceptions of community development work. Workers could be broadly classified into two groups: a 'conflict approach group' and a 'consensus approach group', holding different conceptions of community work. The first comprises those who regarded community organising as an essential element of community development, affirming the community worker identity, and emphasising the service users' lack of power to determine their welfare or fight against oppression. In contrast, those who emphasised providing services and bridging the gaps between needy groups and community resources are the second group. Although workers might have their preferences, they would employ different approaches under different circumstances subject to their judgement.

Tension and professional identity were invisible but particular incidents in the field could reflect the dynamics between funding, power, and community

development, allowing us to observe NGOs' tensions in delivering community work.

First and foremost, I bring to light an incident that occurred in 2008. This was a mere seven years after the establishment of the LSG, and even then, community development had become a diminishing service. This case occurred in a mainstream community work service, the NLCDP, which was operated in a primary social work setting.

A determined pressure group, known as the 'Anti False Harmony Alliance', was formed. Comprising frontline community workers, Tai O residents, service users, social workers, students, and scholars, this alliance aimed to combat the so-called 'false harmony' enforced by the authorities. The incident was described by the alliance as follows (Anti 'False Harmony' Alliance, 2009):

“In 2008, a black rainstorm badly hit Tai O, and the Neighbourhood Level Community Development Project (NLCDP) gave victims help. This displeased the Islands District Officer (of the Home Affairs Department) and the Tai O Rural Affairs Committee. Upon receiving their complaints, the Secretary for Home Affairs had, on a particular occasion, reminded the responsible organisation of the need to maintain harmonious community relations in carrying out community work. As a result, two social workers who provided services in the area were immediately transferred and received a written warning. Indeed, this is an apparent political interference by the government into the autonomy of social services”.

In short, the complainants' dissatisfaction with the community workers was that they did not maintain harmonious relations since they mobilised residents to express their opinions to the government departments to control the damage made to the community. Undoubtedly, this was NLCDP's responsibility, and it was already agreed upon and written in the service

agreement. However, now complaints were made about social workers when performing their duties under this agreement.

Concomitantly, the Tai O incident reminded local practitioners to reassess the challenges they were facing in the field. Particularly, it raised questions about whether social work agencies had been pressured by government officials to obstruct or not support the social action and advocacy work to which NLCDP practitioners were deeply committed.

The case was eventually brought to the Panel of Welfare Service of the Legislative Council<sup>5</sup>, and there was a view explicitly made by legislative councillors as below (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2010, p. 2):

“The Tai O incident was not an isolated incident. There were concerns among deputations that as funding for subvented organisations was granted under the Lump Sum Grant Subvention System, NGOs were subject to pressure from the funding organisations during the funding allocation process. In addition, there were allegations that some NGOs had been attempting to suppress the dissenting views of frontline social workers in delivering community work to secure funding under the service bidding exercises. This had undermined the professional autonomy of social workers”.

In this case, the NLCDP team, a service experiencing a decline in its resources and capacity, was forced to prioritise a harmonious community atmosphere over the community development core values and the agreed service mission. This has led to tensions between various parties. One of the primary sources

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<sup>5</sup> One of the functions of the Panel of Welfare Service of the Legislative Council is to monitor and examine Government policies and issues of public concern relating to welfare (including women welfare) and rehabilitation services, poverty, social enterprise and Family Council, as well as to monitor and examine, to the extent it considers necessary, the above policy matters referred to it by a member of the Panel or by the House Committee.

of tension was the management's perceived lack of trust in the performance of frontline workers. This lack of trust was not just a crucial element for the success of CD operations but also for upholding the community work mission and core practice. Self-censorship of the NGO management was also evident, as NGOs were unwilling to make the government unhappy, not only the particular department that provided the funding. Between NGOs and funding bodies, community development core values and practices were sacrificed at the expense of maintaining a harmonious atmosphere in the community. Finally, there were tensions between workers and local stakeholders as they strove to balance the diverse interests of the community residents. The pro-government stakeholders in the community could pressure NGOs through the government. The flow of impact from macro- to micro-ethics was demonstrated in this incident. Consequently, a diminishing service was forced to alter its ordinary practice at the expense of politically correct community expectations.

Notably, this incident visualised the tricky dual governance of community development services. The department that exerted significant pressure on the organisation was the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB), the policy owner of community development. In contrast, SWD, the service regulator responsible for ensuring compliance with standards and regulations, did not play an obvious role in the incident. The complexity of this dual governance will be further identified in the following incident that visualises the deadlock between NGOs and the government regarding community development.

Since the mainstream community development services were established to echo the community-building policy, the government dissolved the Community Work Division of the SWD and transferred its monitoring work on CD to the Home Affairs Department (HAD), currently under the HAB, in 1985 to strengthen the latter's control and coordination on community building policy (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1997; Kam & Mok, 2019). This was a sign of SWD's fading out of community development because the HAB, not

SWD, was made responsible for community-building policy. Currently, dual accountability is still in place. The HAB was responsible for the community development policy and finance, while SWD took care of the service quality of the NLCDP and Community Centres in line with other subsidized social services. As already mentioned, community development in HK has been a social service. Under this arrangement, CD operators got enough space to practise community development because the required service outputs and outcomes were tailor-made for community work. In addition, at the operational level, the SWD only took up performance management duty while the HAD, which implemented the HAB's policies, seldom intervened in daily practice. This condition was welcomed by the sector and the professional autonomy was secured.

Unexpectedly, the dual governance became the turning point of not implementing the proposal to merge community centre services into an integrated family service centre in the early 2000s, as mentioned in section 2.5. This was because CD resources were controlled by the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB). In contrast, the merging proposal was raised by the SWD, which was not legitimate to mobilise resources from another department, the SWD, for the said purpose. As a result, the implementation of the merging proposal was halted (Wong, 2010) .

Ironically, a formal policy paper designated for the CD service was formulated after this threat since the HAB had to clarify its right to manage the CD resources. It was followed by the establishment of an official platform, namely an NGO Forum on Community Development (CD Forum). This platform aimed to consult the sector, exchange views on the community development service with the bureau regularly, and reconfirm the CD objectives in a policy statement documenting the core values and objectives of CD (Home Affairs Bureau, 2005).

In other words, the policy paper for CD and the CD forum were products of the said threat to community work services in the early 2000s. Since then, the CD

Forum has become a battlefield where the sector sought to uphold its community development core values with the government. The CD Forum only focused on reporting details of resources generated from the termination of NLCDPs and debating service target groups included in the neighbourhood mutual support scheme, which was a new project type, by using resources from the terminated NLCDPs. The debate was about the main target groups of the scheme. The HAB proposed to confine these to new arrivals and ethnic minorities. In contrast, the sector thought this set-up contradicted the objective of CD to target the community as a whole. Although the sector had submitted different proposals to the HAB to widen the project scope and address social problems in the old urban and rural areas, all were rejected by the department. Therefore, the repeating debate in the forum meetings did not help to increase the overall CD resources, nor did it facilitate the growth of CD.

Worse still, the HAB had not convened the forum on a regular basis as required by the policy paper, which was perceived by the sector as unacceptable (Office of the Ombudsman, 2021). In 2016, some NGO members of the CD forum walked out from a meeting to express their anger. This was because the HAB was indifferent to the sector's prolonged request to launch projects which targeted communities as a whole rather than only two specific user groups, namely new immigrants and ethnic minorities (Office of the Ombudsman, 2021). This action was perceived as a very radical action by the NGOs under the Lump Sum Grant (LSG) era.

Nevertheless, the action behind reflected tensions and dilemmas in the sector regarding funding and power. Under the LSG mechanism, the relationship between NGOs became competitive, so it was difficult to consolidate collective power to put pressure on the government. The CD forum succeeded in this action only because of its nature as an advisory body composed of members from designated NGOs operating mainstream community development services, which makes consensus easier to reach. Nevertheless, ironically, although the sector initiated a walkout to express

their anger, the individual agencies continued to bid on these projects that did not treat the whole community as a service target. No matter how firm the sector collectively sought to uphold the CD values, individual operators had to face the problem of survival in deciding whether projects could be continually run to address grassroots families' needs.

This incident clearly showed that the historical problem of the CD governance being split into two departments has significantly impacted policy execution. Despite the HAB's ownership of the CD policy, its reluctance to fully implement it has led to a deadlock. This deadlock has hindered the CD policy implementation and affected the use of resources and the maintenance of the core CD values expected by the sector.

NGOs were angry because the government had broken their baseline commitment to community development – the uniqueness and core values of community work were rejected and challenged. Although a community development policy was written after a thorough engagement with NGOs, the government treated it in its own way while NGOs felt helpless. From the government's perspective, community service was only one of the means of attaining the policy objectives. The NGOs' walkout has not impacted the government's stand, but only the NGOs' stance of expressing their anger.

This incident can help us understand why workers are tense in delivering community work after the welfare reform. This tension is connected to the original position of community development – its uniqueness and core values.

After the community development's resources were cut and the implementation of LSG, the conventional community development approach could only be implemented in the existing mainstream services. The number of workers employing a conflict approach decreased, with many not being allowed in the local community as in the Tai O incident. It was because the ideology about community development between the government and the NGO sector, mainly frontline workers, was different. Implementing original



and conventional community development with new resources from all sources has been impossible. Workers who operate new projects with the original ideology would be frustrated or ambivalent in performing their professional roles. This is because some of their work would not be recognised by the funding body, which supported them in meeting other specific service needs.

Ironically, although NGOs rejected the proposals, they had to bid for these projects also for their 'survival'. This was because NGOs could no longer obtain new community development resources from the government after the resource-cutting exercise. The only alternative was to search for other funding bodies to support time-limited projects. Therefore, although these new projects could not match community development's core values, NGOs thought, after all, that these were additional resources for rendering community development services.

The NGOs had approached SWD, lobbying the department to support their stand. Still, SWD did not support the NGO's request to deliver services that target the entire community because it contradicted the government's approach to service integration. It was predictable since SWD had proposed to absorb community centres' resources into the reformed integrative family service.

Summarising the walkout action in the CD Forum, it reflects tensions regarding delivering community development services with social work capacity as follows:

1. The community development policy failed to safeguard CD's core values and practices. It was only established to address NGOs' grievances, but currently, it has been used to manoeuvre the CD service direction towards the government's political goal.

2. The workers' loyalty to the original position of community development and the professional identity they established was shown. Unfortunately, this said loyalty was powerless in pushing the development of the service. In contrast, the two groups of community workers (conflict approach and consensus approach) in the field might have different views towards 'loyalty'. The former led the dominant discourse of CD, whereas the latter might think diversifying services would benefit service development and open up new possibilities for community growth. Additionally, the original community work position was incompatible with the requirements of the NPM policies and the neo-liberal agenda that focused on output and outcome and the political expectation of building up a harmonious and stable society.
3. The internal struggle of practitioners (frontline workers and managers) under the new social welfare era was a significant aspect of the tension in community development. This struggle, which is not to be underestimated, is a key factor in understanding the challenges faced by the workers.
4. Targeting the community as a whole is a less appealing approach to secure funds than targeting a specific service area. To survive, NGOs have to build up a moderate image. This is essential for them in the new funding era to expand services.

## **2.6 Community work secondary settings**

As defined in Chapter 1, the phrase 'Community work secondary settings' (CWSS) used in this thesis refers to the context where the studied community work teams were located; it is developed by referring to a concept namely 'social work in secondary settings', which means that social workers operate

in an environment where “social work is not the only or not the primary profession” (Hepworth et al., 1997, p. 195).

Social work in secondary settings is not uncommon in Hong Kong. For example, the school social work service has been operating in secondary schools since the 1970s, aiming to identify and help students with academic and psychosocial problems and maximize their educational opportunities. Also, medical social workers working in public hospitals aim to provide timely social work intervention to patients and their families and help them cope with or solve problems arising from illness, trauma, or disability.

In the community work sector, since the early 2000s, various governmental departments or public organisations responsible for work areas relating to urban redevelopment, public housing and building safety have become more willing to engage the social work profession to ease their policies and service implementation process through reaching out to the communities (Fung and Wong, 2014). These projects were designed to assist funding bodies in achieving their organizational goals. For example, Urban Renewal Social Service Teams (URSST) were established to safeguard a smooth renewal process, while Social Service Teams in the Buildings Department (BDSST) were set up to remove those human factors that hindered residents from complying with building ordinances. On the other hand, the Housing Advisory and Service Teams (HAST) were piloted to help new residents who moved into a remote area to have a good adjustment to living in their new local community.

Therefore, ‘community work in secondary settings’ means the organizational location of these teams in institutional settings other than the Social Welfare Department or organizations which are familiar with the social welfare sector. The community projects which operate in the community work secondary settings have three characteristics: 1) Social work is not the primary profession in the working environment, 2) Sources of funding are not from social welfare agencies, and 3) Service contexts relate to specific governmental policy areas rather than social welfare.

The trend of employing social work professionals in secondary settings by 'non-social welfare' organizations can be interpreted from two sides. The positive side refers to society's recognition that the social work profession plays a functional role in supporting grassroots residents to overcome adversity caused by government policies. On the negative side, the operating agencies are challenged by some people who believe that in these secondary settings, the profession is paid to serve the authority to reach their policy objectives rather than local community needs.

Nevertheless, since the funding bodies did not perceive these projects as a community work service, the space for social workers to undertake policy advocacy or community organising work on top of direct service required by the funding bodies was then limited. As a result, tensions and conflict between frontline social workers and representatives of the funding bodies in day-to-day practice inevitably appeared.

The Urban Renewal Social Service Team (URSST), which was one of the main sources of participants in this research, was a unique service separated from mainstream CD services. However, in fact, when the CD sector bargained with the government on NLCDP's continuity in the 1990s, the old urban area was explicitly proposed as one of the replaced transient communities – meaning that the project team would serve the old urban areas where redevelopment would take place. However, this was turned down by the government (Wong, 2010). This proposal implied that the community work sector broadly perceived social service in urban renewal areas as one kind of community work.

In addition, considering both the timing of rolling out SWD's new funding mechanism and the cuts in resources from community development services in the early 2000s, the establishment of URSSTs was regarded as an absorption of community work (Lam, 2011). Of course, there was a fundamental difference between the mainstream community work services and the urban renewal social service team. The term 'absorption' could be

understood as the timing of mainstream services marginalising while the authority established the social service teams. This process created an impression that the CD resources were being shifted from mainstream services to time-limited projects in secondary settings. Furthermore, SWD and the operator of the redevelopment were in two different systems. Nevertheless, most of these social service teams were operated by NGOs which have rendered community development services for a long time, and were located in the community work division of the organisations. Therefore, workers practising in these teams were still socialised as community workers in their agencies.

Urban redevelopment is the policy backdrop of the URSST. Currently, urban redevelopment in Hong Kong is governed by the Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance (URAO), enacted in July 2000. It is one of the strategies used by the government to address urban decay, which is a complicated issue in Hong Kong involving various stakeholders' mutually conflicting interests (Cook & Ng, 2001).

Urban redevelopment involves town planning, which is criticised as a top-down and profit-dominated process that pays little attention to the original social networks and populations. Redevelopment also creates involuntary removal and residents are relocated from their original community network (Chui, 2003). As a result, the government's initiation of the Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance (URAO) is described by Lam (2011) as a factor that produces a new focus of community discontent and action, since old communities are uprooted under redevelopment.

Since urban redevelopment affects the livelihoods of people with vulnerabilities, the URAO stated that the social work profession needs to be engaged during redevelopment by utilising a social service team employed by the URA. In addition, the service agreement between the URA and operating agencies requires the latter to independently carry out their operations and work closely with the URA's front-line staff to realise the URA's mission (Law,

Chui, Wong, Lee, & Ho, 2012).

URSST is one of the teams studied in this research. Tensions in employing community work arise mainly when a conflict of interest between the funding body and the residents appears from day one of the team's establishment. The independency and autonomy of URSSTs has been a critical issue since their birth.

Before 2011, the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) directly employed the SST. However, social workers' independence in protecting residents' rights and welfare has been questioned since these teams were employed through open tendering by the URA, an urban renewal project operator. In Hong Kong, land is a limited resource. Therefore, the affected residents' compensation is considerable, while the affected residents and the authorities are primarily in opposition. During the Urban Renewal Strategies review, the URA raised this issue and was of high concern for civil society and the state. Meanwhile, two studies, one commissioned by the URA directly and another commissioned by the Development Bureau (DB) via the URA, reviewed the future directions of SSTs (Law et al., 2012). As a result, many residents were organised to give a view against the old contracting-out mechanism controlled by the URA.

Consequently, the new Urban Renewal Strategy was published in 2011 based on a broad consensus reached during the Development Bureau's extensive two-year public consultation exercise to introduce a people-first, district-based and public participatory approach to urban renewal. Adopting the public and the latter study's recommendations, the new Urban Renewal Strategies (URS) (February 2011) stated that the SSTs would be funded by the Urban Renewal Fund (URF), which is set up with endowment from the URA (Article 39) (Law et al., 2012). The SST directly report to the Board of Trust Fund. This construction aims to build a 'firewall' between the URA and the SSTs to make the SSTs more independent from the URA because SSTs were not directly funded and controlled by the URA. As of March 2016, four NGOs are engaged by the URF to operate urban renewal social service teams to assist

residents affected by the URA's redevelopment projects in several designated districts/projects under the contract term. Nevertheless, some issues on the tripartite relationship between the URF, the URA, and the SSTs have been observed and are worth noting in the new era.

Meanwhile, residents' new wave of self-organised community actions emerged that, to a certain extent, reflected SST's handling of community organising work in the CWSS. At the beginning of the rolling out of the urban renewal strategies, a residents' group named H15 made a formal submission of a town planning application scheme to the Town Planning Board to regain the right to redevelop a street in Wanchai (Lam, 2011, p. 85). This remarkable achievement was an imaginative proposal in the local context, although the authority eventually turned the plan down (Cook & Ng, 2001). The group engaged people within and beyond the community, particularly professionals, academics and students who were persuaded by the residents' frustrations and thought this was a question of the justice of supporting community rights against such bullying in a renewal process. Noteworthy, these social actions were organised by residents in the form of an alliance. The social service team did not own the championship, even though by common practice, it could be understood that the team would support residents regarding these actions in a backup capacity.

Another source of participants in this research came from the Social Services Teams in the Buildings Department (BDSST). These were established by the Buildings Department (BD) in 2002 to address the increasing expectations of the community and the implementation of various large-scale operations to enforce building safety, health and environmental standards. The social service teams aimed to take care of the financial, psychological, and social needs of complainants and owners/occupants affected by the department's enforcement actions, enhance mutual understanding and streamline the communication between occupants and the BD. The teams mainly handle and follow up cases involving social issues by liaising with and referring to other

governmental departments. Team members accompany BD staff to conduct site visits for complicated cases that require particular negotiation or counselling services; undertake outreach, on a need basis, to owners/occupants encountering financial, psychological and social difficulties; participate in the department's meetings with owners' organisations and other governmental departments to address social issues arising from BD's operations; and provide consultation and training to BD staff on handling cases involving emotional owners/occupants (Buildings Department, 2022).

Unlike URSSTs, the BDSSTs encountered less political issues. Their main problems occurred when residents were forced to evacuate from units with illegal constructions, mainly when there was no available resettlement policy to accommodate residents' needs. Therefore, workers of these social service teams were pressured by other community workers who supported affected residents at the community level to liaise with the department and advocate for them.

Owing to the unique nature of the project teams attached to the community work secondary settings (CWSS), workers practising in this context sometimes raise questions themselves relating to their professional identity, such as 'Are we doing community work?' or 'Are we doing what a community worker should do?' From the funding body's perspective, they only do social service, whereas other community workers think they need to do what is conventionally understood as community work. Therefore, CWSS is not an independent part of the community work sector but a link to the overall social welfare and CD sector in the local context. On the one hand, community workers practising here must fulfil funding bodies' demands and expectations; some of them have to exert extra effort to perform community workers' professional identity, which poses a significant challenge to them.



## **2.7 Concluding remarks**

Overall, community development has had more than half a century of history in Hong Kong since the end of World War II. The CD sector has experienced its ups and downs regarding service development and resources obtained from the government until the 2000s. Alongside these challenges was a neo-liberal agenda that reshaped the local welfare ecology since the early 1990s; the government has marginalized mainstream community development by narrowing its resources and reforming the social welfare funding mechanism.

Meanwhile, the mainstream community development services greatly impacted the building of community workers' professional identity. The conflict approach was dominant in the earlier stage of development. However, the consensus approach has become popular because NGOs have been concerned about 'survival' after the welfare and service reform in the late 1990s.

As the resources of government-funded community development services were reduced, non-government-funded community development services became diversified. This shift raises important questions about the core values of community development and whether they should be sacrificed for the survival of NGOs, or to what extent such a sacrifice is acceptable. It is crucial to note that these questions have no standard answer, as they are inherently contested and subject to individual perspectives.

The community development sector, despite its challenges and diminishing position in the social service field, has never rested. The sector's resilience is evident while the welfare reform has significantly decreased the distance between mainstream and non-mainstream CD services, leading to a more diverse and inclusive landscape of community work. However, workers with the original CD professional identity faced challenges in some new settings, particularly in secondary settings. These challenges do have implications for their handling of professional ethics in everyday practice, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

# **Chapter 3 Aspects of autonomy, ethics, identity and practical wisdom in professional life**

## **3.1 Introduction**

The research interest of this study, which holds significant implications for the professional autonomy of social workers practising community work in the secondary settings of Hong Kong, is about the impact of the funding mechanism on practitioners' autonomy. This is particularly crucial when their clients' interests conflict with those of the funding bodies. Community work, an integral part of social work in Hong Kong, necessitates social workers to safeguard their clients' welfare, and the fulfilment of this duty requires professional autonomy, a topic that is undoubtedly related to professional ethics and is of paramount importance in the field of social work.

This chapter is titled "Aspects of autonomy, ethics, identity and practical wisdom in professional Life". Unlike traditional literature review, this grounded theory study took a unique approach to avoid being influenced by existing theories in professional ethics (Deering & Williams, 2020). Instead of deeply reviewing the literature before data collection, a brief overview of the established significant theories and trends in professional ethics was conducted. This approach allowed for a fresh perspective and outlined the implications of professional ethics for community development as a brief examination of the study areas.

Meanwhile, this research's theoretical sampling (see Chapter 4) was led by a salient professional identity issue the participants faced – whether they could employ a community work approach without hesitation in the setting. In addition, footprints of professional identity issues were spread in those incidents presented in Chapter 5 regarding the problem of trust and workers' negative emotions in practice. Hence, in the literature review conducted during the data analysis stage, I used the institutional logic of professional identity (Webb, 2017b) as a framework to locate discussion found in the literature that facilitates my theoretical sensitivity to further analyse the two core categories of this research in Chapters 6 and 7. I used this approach because, in the middle of this research, the flow of this study was primarily related to the professional identity issues that participants encountered. In this chapter, these materials have been integrated to explore aspects of the literature relevant to critical themes that influenced the research design (professional ethics and professional autonomy of social workers) and the themes that emerged as particularly salient from the research findings (professional identity and practical wisdom in ethical decision-making).

This literature review, presented in the earlier part of this thesis, not only provides readers with a theoretical context but also equips them with practical insights. These insights will be invaluable in grasping the further analysis of this work in the rest of the chapters.

The term 'professional autonomy' broadly refers to practitioners' ability to make decisions and take action according to their professional knowledge and values. Professional autonomy is part of a commonly-held traditional

understanding of what it means to be a member of a profession. It underpins the concept and practice of professional ethics insofar as practitioners can only enact professional ethical values if they have the autonomy to do so. Being a member of an occupation that is characterised as a profession and signing up for a set of professional values is a fundamental part of the professional identity of a social worker.

As discussed in the previous chapters, social workers in secondary settings in Hong Kong face numerous constraints that have profound implications for their professionalism, including their professional ethics, professional autonomy, professional identity, and ability to use professional wisdom in their work. In this chapter, I will explore aspects of the relevant literature on these themes, including the challenges of neo-liberal and managerial approaches to the organisation of social services in many parts of the world.

The chapter will consider the concept of professionalism and the extent to which this is still valid in the current climate in many countries. It will examine how professional autonomy, professional identity and professional wisdom are understood in some literature on professions in general and social work in particular. It will also consider social workers' specific values and practices in community development roles.

### **3.2 Approaches to professionalism**

Professional autonomy and professional ethics are the focus of this research. These two terms can be seen as elements of professionalism. Noteworthy,

terms relating to 'professionalism' have encountered a definition problem (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015). For example, 'professional' is an essentially contested concept nearly equivalent to 'good' in the sense that the term is always used as an adjective to describe good things, while 'professionalism' has been exploited more diffusely (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015; Gallie, 1956). In addition, 'professionalism' itself has been called a contested concept because it can be understood from various political and ethical perspectives (Banks, 2004).

Given the complexity of these terms, providing a concrete definition is challenging. To address this challenge, we can begin by examining the concept of 'profession' because the definition of a profession is significantly influenced by the chosen approaches to professionalism (Banks, 2004). There are three distinct approaches to theories of professionalism, namely essentialist, strategic, and historical or developmental approaches, which have been formulated, each playing a crucial role in defining the profession (Torstendahl, 1990).

Firstly, the essentialist approach is dedicated to identifying the characteristics of professionalism and professionals. It posits that professionals hold a unique position in society and that professionalisation unfolds in a specific manner (Parsons, 1939; Wilensky, 1964). This approach linked to a functionalist view of society gave rise to a trait theory of professionalism and was instrumental in determining which occupations could be classified as professions (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015). These traits, such as a code of ethics, a service ideal, specialist education and expertise, and a

degree of occupational control over membership and standards, were considered the hallmarks of professions (Airaksinen, 1994). However, the specific items included in these lists varied, although certain key elements remained central. Trait theories enjoyed popularity until the 1970s since they were critiqued for their idealistic and vocational understanding of professional practice and for overlooking the social power of professions (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015).

Besides, when it comes to the types of collective action within professional groups and the dynamics between them, the strategic approach is heavily influenced by Weberian conflict theory and the concept of 'closure' (Banks, 2004). This influence can be best understood as the act of "keeping other people away from the advantages someone has got in society using an exclusive strategy" (Banks, 2004, p. 20). Similarly, as in Collins's theory of professions, social behaviour and structure can be explained based on individuals' interests in maximising their power, wealth and status. In their quest to control market conditions, occupations seek to obtain a successful status and monopolise activities, but they also have the power to transform their work into 'status honour' (Collins, 1990). 'Status honour' generally refers to the respect and recognition that professionals receive from society due to their expertise and contributions. This transformative power makes professionals' social rituals revolve around their work. Accordingly, education is identified as a modern form of ritual that is critical and indispensable in forming the professions that shape our society's future, underscoring professionals' crucial role in societal development.

Thirdly, assuming that professions go through different stages of development, the historical or developmental approach to professionalism Torstendahl (1990) suggests involves examining the occupational groups' mutual relationships over time concerning patterns that professionals (as forming social groups) are interested in.

Additionally, more than just categorising an occupation as a profession, there's a compelling need to understand the trajectory of professionalisation within it. Describing 'profession' as a folk concept, Freidson (2001) introduces a profound intellectual tool, ideal-typical professionalism; this concept generates a comprehensive list of characteristics, providing a significant standard for evaluating and analysing historical occupations, whose features evolve over time and across different locations. This approach to professionalism is an exploration of whether occupations are progressing towards professionalisation. The characteristics encompass 'recognised knowledge and skills', 'occupationally controlled division of labour', 'occupationally controlled labour market requiring training credentials of entry and career mobility', 'occupationally controlled training programme', and 'an ideology serving some transcendent value and asserting greater devotion to doing good work' (Freidson, 2001).

Professionalisation, a process where an occupation transforms into a profession, according to Siegrist (1994), involves significant and influential actors, including educational institutions, the state, members of professions and their organisations, client organisations, the media and public opinion. Notably, the issue of state and political intervention is a crucial aspect

connected with the professions' collective autonomy, which should be considered. This emphasis on the role of the state and political intervention ensures that the audience is engaged and interested in the broader context of professionalisation. Siegrist (1994) develops three models to outline the differentiation in terms of the role of state, government and legislation, including 'the traditional corporate professions and the weak state', 'professionalisation from above in a bureaucratic authoritarian state', and 'professionalisation in the post-revolutionary liberal-democratic societies'.

### **3.3 A shift of accounts of profession**

To understand the above discussion of various approaches to professionalism in this study, which focuses on professional autonomy and ethics, we can refer to various scholars' evaluations of whether social work is a profession.

Adopting a trait theories perspective, a significant tool in evaluating the professional status of the social work profession, we can gain insights from previous studies. For example, Flexner (2001) suggests that social work is deeply committed to advancing the common social interest despite being often perceived as a supplementary profession. This comparison to traditional professions implies that social work functions as a mediating agency with a different level of responsibility and risk-taking.

Similarly, in his examining the power structures of professions, Johnson (1972) classifies social work as a mediated profession. This means that the occupational control of social work is primarily overseen by another agent,



often the state, in terms of how professional work is structured and whose interests are served. However, it is crucial to note that groups of professionals have a significant degree of autonomy in organising their activities and the services they provide within the boundaries set by the state or other mediating bodies.

As stated, trait theory has limitations while understanding that professionalism has evolved. In addition, two complementary directions have emerged in professions: 'acknowledging the intrinsic relationship between professions and social power' and 'emphasising the diversity of professions and contrasting the different professions' (Larson, 2017). As insight is gained from these directions of not only thinking about the question from a trait perspective, the critical issue can be shifted from social work's qualification as a profession to the meaning and possibility of different claims to professional status (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015). Although the authors stress that social work has a strong claim, it can be undermined if the necessary social conditions do not support social work professionalism, highlighting the need to address these social conditions (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015).

### **3.4 Threats and ambivalence towards professionalisation**

Traditionally, professions and professionals embrace professionalisation. However, in some cases, there is an ambivalence. For example, in the UK, when social professions (social work, youth work and community work) were developing, practitioners' voices against professionalisation emerged, highlighting its drawbacks in two directions (Banks, 2004). These voices,

crucial to the debate, pointed out the specification and prescription of rules and standards that challenge the scope of professional discretion and autonomy. Second, some professionals perceive the exclusive professional bodies and the requirements for experienced training as widening the gap between workers and clients.

For community work, in fact, globally, the International Association for Community Development (IACD) has defined community development as a practice-based profession (International Association of Community Development, 2020). This global trend towards professionalisation reflects an increased desire to enhance the recognition of community development and focus more on professional ethics and conduct. Nonetheless, not all community development workers feel comfortable claiming themselves as professionals; one of the concerns is worrying that the distance between workers and service users would widen. This tension is similar to the above example of social professions in the UK.

Professionals' concerns about professionalisation can be viewed as their responses to their profession's challenges. These challenges are not isolated incidents but are part of a larger context influenced by evolving societal norms, government policies, market forces, and shifts in professional values. As Banks (2004) points out, these challenges are multifaceted:

1. The introduction of market principles and the increasing focus on economy and efficiency have profoundly impacted professionalisation. This has led to a shift towards outputs and outcomes, resource targeting, and work specialisation, raising significant concerns about the

profession's future. The growth of private and voluntary sector provision attempts to control and undermine the power and status of all professional groups.

2. The state has played a significant role in shaping professionalisation. It has sought to incorporate professional education and training into competency-based vocational qualifications designed to demonstrate the skills and knowledge necessary for a specific job. The state has effectively limited practitioners' autonomy by initiating standards and controls.

However, it is important to note that diverse and vibrant voices are in the discussion of professionalisation and its threats. Some forces advocate for professionalisation, emphasising the importance of coherent professional identities and status in maintaining and advancing professions' credibility, status, and public trust in occupational groups, thereby empowering them (Banks, 2004).

### **3.5 The critical reading of professionalism**

One of the most significant themes in the study of professionalism is the contrasts between idealistic and critical readings of professions. Professions and professionals hold a unique and significant social power, which could deliver oppressive service to clients if misused. It is believed that "there is something inherently troublesome about the generation of professional status and power" (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015, p. 15). Cribb and Gewirtz (2015, pp. 12-13) further explain that the core tension between idealistic and critical

readings is built on the possibility that the “profession’s image may mask different ends and interests of professions, professionals or those of other powerful forces or agents”. Therefore, owing to this unique social power that professions and professionals possess, which stresses the responsibility that comes with it, and oppositely, there is a potential for harm if that responsibility is not upheld.

According to Cribb and Gewirtz (2015), the ideal and sceptical readings are different but are broadly compatible with others. The sceptical perspective raises questions about the social and personal feasibility of professionalism in certain climates, which is a necessary consideration. The critical perspective serves to urge us to acknowledge the realistic challenges of professionalism and to inspire us to construct a more realistic ideal type of professionalism that is suitable for the current climate.

Therefore, a general picture of a broad positive conception of professionalism is outlined by seeing professional roles from the inside and outside. Accordingly, “the nature and value of professionalism is found at the intersection of ‘expertise’ [inside] and ‘social influence’ [outside]” (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015, p. 13). In turn, we need to consider individual practitioners’ specific goals in the context where the professional work is impacted. This understanding is crucial for comprehending the linkage between professions and various kinds of social power. This account perceives professionalism not just as a mode of social coordination, but as a significant influence as it embodies admirable characteristics, values and dispositions, shaping our professional identity.

According to Freidson (2001), professionalism stands out as the ‘third logic’ as a unique mode of social coordination. This concept highlights the distinct way professions interact with and are influenced by markets and state-related bureaucracies. In this sense, professionalism is a form of social organization that operates alongside the market and bureaucratic logic, often in tension.

Professionals, as Freidson (2001) emphasizes, play a unique role in social coordination. They possess a diverse range of knowledge, from academic to social and emotional, which they draw upon in their work. This practical capability equips them to tackle challenges in their field, underscoring the significance of their role. Importantly, professionalism requires not just expertise, but also a strong ethical foundation—embodying admirable qualities and inspiring others (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015).

Pulling these two dimensions together, professionalism is an ‘expertise-based social authority’ (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015). As aforementioned, professionals have two senses of ‘authority’: 1) the knowledge and skills they possess in their field, and 2) the social powers to license social influence in specific domains that are gained from their position. Then, they exercise their knowledge, including the relevant ethical dispositions, to promote the service ideals. Nevertheless, many conditions must be met to make professionalism possible, including suitable social, political, and institutional arrangements and suitable personal and interpersonal dispositions and relationships.

The enactment of professionalism is a demanding exercise, especially when it involves individual and collective agents. It can be anticipated that the enactment process requires making decisions that weigh complex practical,

political, and ethical judgments. These decisions then shape the necessary conditions and activities and depend on emotional and human resources. Professionalism, as a combination of ‘relational expertise’ and ‘technical expertise’, underscores the significance of these decisions.

### **3.6 The ground of professional ethics**

The literature reveals that professionalism is firmly grounded in ethics. Implementing professionalism involves a continuous and crucial process of self-reflection and critique, which professionals are deeply engaged in and committed to. This process, for example, includes the readiness, and indeed the necessity, to question established managerial and organisational norms, such as hierarchical decision-making or discriminatory practices (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015). Accordingly, professionals are expected to actively redefine these norms and play a significant role in shaping the broader social landscape. These complex ethical and political challenges are an integral part of professional ethics.

Professional ethics, as interpreted by Banks (2004), can be seen as special norms in a defined occupational group. Banks divided professional ethics into ‘espoused professional ethics’ and ‘enacted professional ethics’. The first refers to “the ideals, principles, rules and statements of purpose found in public documents like professional codes of ethics”; in contrast, the second refers to “the standards and norms of behaviour accepted and followed by professional group members” (Banks, 2004, pp. 49-50), highlighting the importance of these norms in shaping professional conduct.

Professional ethics can also be understood in a narrow or broad sense. The narrow perspective focuses on ethical dilemmas and applying ethical theories to formulate and assess professional decisions. In the recent history of professional ethics, the 1980s-1990s has been characterised as the 'ethical theory and decision-making period' (Reamer, 1998), during which several ethical decision-making models were developed. On the other hand, the broad perspective is undergoing a fascinating evolution towards a post-modern approach. This approach, which is not only gaining popularity but also becoming increasingly relevant, concentrates on professional life, values, and normative beliefs (Chambers, 1997).

Importantly, we need to understand the foundation of professional ethics, which is the commitment to advance the welfare of others and, ultimately, the common good (a social purpose of a profession). This foundation is the moral justification of the professional role (Koehn, 1994). Airaksinen (1994) defines this social purpose as the 'service ideal', the most fundamental aspect of professional life. If recognized by professionals, service users, and the general public, a service ideal can involve the goal of serving marginalized or disenfranchised individuals (Oakley & Cocking, 2001).

Notably, social welfare is claimed as the service ideal of social work (Airaksinen, 1994), a profession where this ideal is particularly significant. It is a comprehensive and all-encompassing goal that guides the social work practice, not just in specific instances, but in every aspect of the profession, akin to those identified for traditional professions such as medicine and law with the service ideal of health and justice, respectively.

Human beings will experience vulnerability throughout their lives, and these vulnerable individuals or groups are often the recipients of social work services. However, vulnerability, despite its challenges, also has a positive aspect. According to MacIntyre (1999), the concept of self-protection leads to human flourishing when vulnerability is recognized and addressed. This concept can be further categorized into 'ordinary vulnerability' and 'more-than-ordinary vulnerability' (Sellman, 2005). The former refers to individuals who have the capacity to protect themselves from harm, while the latter denotes those who have lost this capacity. In the context of social work, vulnerable clients often rely on professionals to support them in their journey towards human flourishing. Banks and Gallagher (2009) stress the importance of professional ethics in guiding these relationships, particularly in contexts of vulnerability and dependency. This emphasizes the significant responsibility that professionals in the field of social work bear, as they are the ones who maintain a balance of power between themselves and their vulnerable clients.

### **3.7 Ethical theories and approaches**

Social workers in the globalised world with heightened job complexity must face various ethical challenges. Moral philosophy offers practitioners discernment to develop their ethical thinking, empowering them to navigate these challenges effectively. It can locate professional ethics in the broader field of philosophical ethics (Banks, 2004). In the social work field, most ethical theories and approaches are imported from Western philosophy (Gray & Webb, 2010).



There are different ways to categorise ethical theories, one of which is to divide them into detached and situated approaches, as Banks (2004) suggested. Accordingly, the detached approach perceives the moral agent as a rational, detached person who handles ethical issues in similar situations as other ordinary people do. This category's theories and approaches include principle-based, right-based, discourse-based, and case-based (Banks, 2004). On the other hand, situated approaches emphasize the cultivation of character traits or virtues and stress the importance of communal practices, personal relationships, attitudes, emotions, and motives; related approaches include agent-focused ethics, community-based ethics, and relationship-based ethics (Banks, 2004).

Another way of categorising moral theories and approaches is to divide them into naturalistic and non-naturalistic. Naturalistic ethical theories are impacted by Aristotle's philosophy, which is concerned with the ultimate end of morality, that is, human flourishing, which cannot be achieved without actualising the moral virtues. Teleology, utilitarianism, consequentialism, and virtue ethics belong to this group (Gray & Webb, 2010). These theories are not just abstract concepts, but they have a direct relevance to social work. For example, utilitarianism focuses on maximising 'the good' and 'the least harm' for the most significant number of people. At the same time, consequentialism emphasises the consequences of ethical decisions, a factor that social workers constantly consider in their practice.

In contrast, non-naturalistic ethical theories perceive ethics as transcendental and objective, and ethics exist independently of human nature

(Gray & Webb, 2010). Accordingly, Kantian deontology influences social work as a value-driven profession. Its core values, presented as general ethical principles, create a strong connection between practitioners and their clients, guiding them to differentiate right from wrong actions.

Regardless of the categorisation of ethical theories and approaches, philosophical theories developed in the context of social work are not just theoretical constructs but can generate practical tools that help practitioners navigate the complex ethical landscape, providing them with the necessary support and guidance.

Theorists have identified some broad questions about professional ethics from these theories. These discussions constitute key themes central to understanding contemporary ethics in the caring professions, including whether professional ethics is understood as universal or particular, seen as binding or guiding professional practice, explicit or implicit in practice, and to what extent professional ethics to be regarded as the property of individual practitioners or as social (Hugman, 2005).

In essence, Hugman (2005) suggests that despite the challenge of reconciling conflicting ideas due to cultural differences, predominant liberal ethical theories propose a universal element on the fairness issue. The question of whether professional ethics is binding or guiding choices in action is also discussed. It is evident that professionals need to exercise discretion and make judgments, making the concept of binding less effective. The question of whether ethics is explicit or implicit is also raised. In the context of caring professions, the ability to make ethics explicit is a necessary part of the

capacities of every professional and the responsibility of the professions as communities. This underlines the need for both personal and collective responsibility in maintaining ethical standards. As a result, ethics is both individual and social, with significant implications for professional conduct and the development of ethical guidelines in the caring professions.

In the current complex service context of the postmodern era, practitioners have the freedom to choose ethical theories and approaches that best suit their orientations, whether that means identifying one type of approach or selecting more dynamically and flexibly.

While deontological or Kantian approaches to ethics and consequentialist or utilitarian approaches are the dominant paradigms in contemporary writings on social work ethics, there is a growing interest in ethical theories that focus on the character of the moral agent (virtue ethics) and the caring relationship between people (the ethics of care) (Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Carr, 2016; Gray & Webb, 2010). These emerging paradigms not only provide a vision of what counts as a good society or human flourishing but also have significant practical implications for social work practice and society's well-being. This emphasis on practicality can motivate and engage social work students, educators, and professionals in their work (Banks & Gallagher, 2009).

### **3.8 Challenges to professional ethics from new public management**

New public management is the main tool of neo-liberalism, a globalised free-market economic and political philosophy. At the same time, neo-liberal economics and politics are linked to international, national and local factors that influence community work (Popple, 2015). In Hong Kong, under the UK's colonial administration before 1997, footprints of NPM impacts can be identified since the 1990s, to a certain extent, related to the influence of the UK government. The NPM's impact on community development in Hong Kong has been discussed in Chapter 2.

Under NPM, the interplay between ethics and the new public management in social work is complex and has two contrasting perspectives (Banks, 2013b). Accordingly, the first perspective focuses on a surge in interest in ethics as a response to the perceived excesses of NPM, a reassuring sign of the profession's commitment to ethical practices. The second perspective, in contrast, is a trend towards NPM approaches, which potentially threaten ethical practices based on professional autonomy. In fact, in the late 1990s, there was a rapidly growing interest in ethics. This period is termed as the 'ethics boom'. Accordingly, during this period, publications encompassing ethical theories, codes of ethics, social work dilemmas, and ethical decision-making increased in Europe and the English-speaking world (Banks, 2013b). These publications reflect both sides of two contrasting perspectives.

Banks (2013b) further elaborated on NPM's challenges to professional ethics. Accordingly, NPM approaches perceive service users as problems, victims,

targets, and even consumers, which is the opposite of social work's commitment to respecting service users' dignity, rights, and choices. On the other hand, more regulatory codes of ethics are developed with more detailed practice guidance, presenting responsibilities and standards that exert invisible pressure on practitioners. In addition, this trend emphasises the responsibilities of social workers and service users; it is easy for the former to be blamed for poor judgments and interventions, while clients are seen as the root of problems. Under NPM's impact, ethics are not only de-personalised and de-politicised, but the framing of ethical issues has also shifted to being linked to regulation and conformity to standards. Trusting worker-client relationships have also been changed to contract-type relationships.

### **3.9 Towards a broader scope of professional ethics**

When faced with the negative aspects of NPM, social workers can exercise professional autonomy and discretion. They can do this by leveraging their professional knowledge and experience to make judgements and challenge and resist inhumane, degrading, and unjust practices and policies. This process, rooted in their competence and capability, is a testament to their professional values and ethical practice beliefs. Banks (2018) also points out that recourse to traditional and 'everyday' professional ethics can counterbalance the forces of new public management. Accordingly, this 'ethics' is the opposite of managerial ethics embraced by the NPM, which does not centre on professional autonomy but interprets ethics as professional regulation, rule-following, and conformity.

Embracing a broader perspective, the more recent 'situated' approaches, such as virtue ethics and the ethics of care, have begun to influence social work ethics. These approaches, which emphasize qualities of character, relationships, and moral emotions alongside impartial principles and rules, are not just theoretical constructs. As Airaksinen (1994) suggests, they have practical implications that can significantly enhance the study of professional ethics.

One of the transformative approaches of situated ethics from a broad perspective is Bank's (2010) concept of 'ethics in professional life'. Accordingly, professional life is perceived from a holistic approach by broadening the scope of ethics to include virtues, emotions, and relationships. This approach, as Banks (2010) suggests, has the potential to embed ethics in our lives, making values and norms an integral part of our daily existence.

By locating dilemmas and decisions in a broader social, political and cultural context, this concept understands moral responsibility beyond an individual decision-maker, but in a more relational sense. This understanding can be applied to navigate ethical dilemmas in professional life. For instance, when faced with a decision that could potentially harm a client, a professional can consider the broader societal implications of their actions.

Furthermore, it broadens the scope of focus from codes, conduct, and cases to include three components of 'ethics in professional life': commitment, character, and context (Banks, 2010). Commitment focuses on the internal values of professional practitioners, including their personal, political, professional and societal values. Character, however, places a significant

emphasis on the moral qualities of professional practitioners, recognizing their weight in professional practice. Lastly, context acknowledges practitioners' work contexts, taking a holistic approach that situates the practitioner in webs of relationships and responsibilities, and acknowledges the importance of moral orientation, perception, imagination and emotional work.

Banks (2016) also developed the concept of 'ethics work', putting the concept of ethics in professional life into action, to highlight practitioners' effort to see the macro practice context and be responsible for being ethical workers. 'Ethics work' also encourages practitioners' use of reflexivity that moves beyond general models of ethics as individual decision-making or external regulation. 'Ethics work' re-asserts social workers' role as active and autonomous moral agents who make judgements not only based on ethical principles but also on qualities of character and relationships of care, paying attention to the needs and rights of service users (Banks, 2016).

### **3.10 Professional autonomy, professional discretion and professional agency**

Professionalism depends upon substantial levels of practitioner autonomy, but the climate of organisational professionalism has undermined practitioners' professional judgement and capacity (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015; Karvinen-Niinikoski, Beddoe, Ruch, & Tsui, 2019). These challenges to ethics are mentioned in section 3.8 of this chapter.

Professional ethics, with its micro and macro aspects, plays a crucial role in countering the negative impacts of NPM. Despite the macro-level challenges, practitioners can exercise discretion within the framework of professional ethics, acting as a counterforce to NPM. This function of professional ethics reiterates the critical role of professional autonomy in shaping the micro-ethics operation, offering reassurance and hope for the future of professionalism.

Professional autonomy, a dynamic issue that remains relevant for most professions, is a concept that emerges from the ever-changing landscape of professionalism within modern society and the evolving theories of professions (Brante, 2011). This concept is not just a struggle for jurisdiction, but a key to preserving and enhancing professional power (Freidson, 2001). It is a source of inspiration, empowering professionals to determine the extent of their expertise in a specific field (Abbott, 1988).

Professional autonomy, with its collective and individual implications, fosters a strong sense of belonging within the professional community. As Banks (2004, p. 155) defines it, the collective aspect refers to the “freedom of the professional group and the individual practitioner to establish the framework of principles, standards, or desirable character traits that guide their practice”. This collective aspect is particularly important as it sets the framework within which the individual practitioner exercises their autonomy, creating a sense of community and shared purpose. The latter, on the other hand, is about the “freedom of choice of the individual professional practitioner to make



decisions within the framework set by the professional group” (Banks, 2004, p. 155).

Noteworthy, professional autonomy is often discussed with two other concepts, ‘professional discretion’ and ‘professional agency’ (Karvinen-Niinikoski et al., 2019). When there appears tension between organizational policy and daily professional practice, professionals can exercise discretion to implement policy in a flexible manner; this possibly involves ethical issues or even ethically difficult situations.

Through exercising professional discretion, professionals possess transformative and responsible professional agency (Karvinen-Niinikoski et al., 2019). When professionals are entitled to use their discretion to impact their work and professional identity, this is a professional agency (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). Conceptually, the professional agency is situated between professional discretion, freedom, and contextual and organizational control, threatening professional autonomy and social work values (Karvinen-Niinikoski et al., 2019). The relationship between professional agency and organizational rules is seen when practitioners use discretion (Evans, 2013).

Following Abbott’s (Abbott, 1988) theory, the attainment of autonomous professional status can be seen as a quest for professional and social power, legitimacy, and jurisdiction of field expertise. However, in terms of jurisdiction in particular, some occupations, such as social work and nursing, might be seen as semi-professions, which do not hold complete jurisdiction. However, a brief literature review reveals that the nursing profession has been a key

focus in the study of professional autonomy. The insights and discoveries in the nursing field may be of immense value, significantly enhancing our understanding of the scope of research on professional autonomy in other human and helping professions, including social work. However, it is recognized that studies of other professions may not be directly transferable to social work without further research on social work in particular.

Varjus, Leino-Kilpi, and Suominen (2011) conducted a research project to consolidate how the autonomy of nurses had been studied from 1970 to 2010 and found research focuses relating to professional autonomy in the nursing profession covered five areas: 1) autonomy of decision-making, 2) need for autonomy, 3) perceptions of autonomy, 4) factors influencing autonomy and 5) developing autonomy instruments. However, the nursing field did not agree on the definition of professional autonomy because of various researchers' different theoretical starting points. Various factors influencing professional autonomy were found in the literature. Making use of power could help professionals obtain autonomy in the workplace; Stewart (2001) classified different forms of power nurses use: dominance, transformative, and collaborative. Research by Salhani and Coulter (2009) showed that nurses regained their professional autonomy even from psychiatrists who held actual power in the workplace. The correlation between indeterminacy and professional autonomy may imply how vital decision-making facilitates professional autonomy. The practitioner's role in making professional judgments is strengthened under complex situations.

### **3.11 Challenges to professional autonomy**

Faced with rapid structural, societal, and political change, such as technological advancements, demographic shifts, and policy reforms, the components of professional power systems, including expertise, institutions, and professional status, have been under threat; in turn, autonomy in many professions has been threatened and undermined (Chandler, Berg, Ellison, & Barry, 2017).

Even the paradigm profession of medicine has yet to be exempted from the increasing levels of organisational control in public health systems worldwide. This control, often in bureaucratic regulations and top-down decision-making, has significantly altered the professional landscape (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015).

The changing positions of professionals within the organisational re-arrangement of welfare services are a stark reality. The expansion of NPM in neoliberal governance systems has significantly impacted social work, leading to the erosion of professional autonomy and the corresponding reconfigurations of welfare services.

The tensions between professional autonomy and managerial accountability are evident in the broader changes in the positions of professions (Tsui & Cheung, 2004). In social work, practitioners report stress associated with losing their professional autonomy and commonly experience a sense of management intrusion into clinical decision-making (Lymbery, 1998). The threat to autonomy is manifested in new forms of control, direction, and power systems involving process models and standardisation, often based on computerised systems and accountability regimes (Evans, 2010). These

challenges are not just theoretical, but deeply personal and professional for those in the field.

Social workers who overlap the roles of helper and controller operate in complex dilemmas. Their loyalty is often detected in clashing interests between safeguarding the client's interests and fulfilling societal demands for efficiency and utility.

Evetts (2009) investigated the links between NPM and professionalism in the public service context of Western post-industrial societies. They depicted an emerging blend of two ideal types of professionalism: organisational and occupational. The first type is manifested in a discourse of control used increasingly by workplace managers. The latter, however, is a beacon of hope based on practitioner autonomy, discretionary judgment, and assessment, particularly in complex cases, empowering practitioners in their roles.

Practitioners face a challenging predicament when confronted with the practical and ethical tension between organisational and personal values. Cribb and Gewirtz (2015) point out that they might have three kinds of responses. Suppose a professional role is played in an environment with forceful control. In that case, the challenge for practitioners is to resist and make an effort to reduce the degree of organisational control. On the other hand, some practitioners under control can seek to subvert organisational expectations to preserve a large area of autonomy. A third possibility is that practitioners who hold a pragmatic view and possess specific self-protecting skills take a balancing approach to respond to the tension between organisational control and their autonomy.

Cribb and Gewirtz (2015) align with the third approach, which advocates for practitioners to find the right balance between 'being controlled' and 'being autonomous' when enacting professionalism. They stress that practitioners must assess the types of organisational control in place and the nature and level of professional autonomy required for their professional roles in specific situations. Cribb and Gewirtz (2015) affirm that it is not only feasible but also desirable for practitioners to be partially self-directed professionals who can strike a balance between their institutional and professional identities, reinforcing the importance of professional autonomy in their roles.

### **3.12 Identity formation and authenticity of the professional self**

Professional identity is an integral part of being a professional. It can refer to "an individual's perception of himself and herself, who, as a member of a profession, has responsibilities to society, recipients of care, other professionals, and to himself or herself" (Crigger & Godfrey, 2014, p. 377). Noteworthy, the term professional identity is often used in the literature without an agreed definition. Terms like professional self - concept and professional socialization were found to have the same meaning (Fitzgerald, 2020). Professional identity is both an individual and collective phenomenon. The construction, maintenance and reshaping of a professional identity is a social process that will fully engage the individual social worker.

To examine professional identity, we can focus on practitioners' 'identity work', which refers to the conscious and unconscious efforts individuals make to construct and maintain their professional identity. In this research, I

study community workers' professional identity. We can also pay attention to the 'professional identity issues' described by Webb (2017b). These issues, which permeate working life and exist across all elements of social work to a large extent, are the challenges and complexities that professionals face in establishing and maintaining their professional identity.

To approach matters of concern encircling professional identity, Webb (2017b, p. 228) examined four underlying logics and assumptions to analyse 'professional identity in social work', including "productionist rationality, sentimental politics of authenticity, dynamic stabilisation as a mode of professional reproduction, and regimes of justification, worth and recognition".

As Webb (2017b) points out, these logic and assumptions are not just theoretical constructs. They interlock in the institutional arrangements of social work and its professional regulation, the pattern of education and socialisation, and the mechanisms of practitioner optimisation. By understanding these practical logics, we can gain insights into what professional identity means in professional life and how it can be optimised in social work. In this section, I will use some of these logics to discuss the areas relating to identity work, particularly identity formation and practitioners' authenticity of professional self.

In the institutional logic of 'productionist rationality', tangible or intangible, positive or negative, can be counted as production (Webb, 2017b). In this sense, identity formation is undoubtedly a production, as is the stress derived from professional identity issues. Identity formation, the practitioner's

responsibility and achievement, can be generally understood as part of identity work; this is a process to “fill their selves as the container” (Webb, 2017b, p. 229). As Dent and Whitehead (2013, p. 11) assert, “Professional identity is not static. It is a continuous process of construction, maintenance, and reshaping. This ongoing nature of professional identity work is closely tied to operativity and production, also known as production rationality”.

From a broader perspective, Giddens (1991) identified the importance of fateful moments in exploring identity formation, which is relevant to this research context. The workers of the social service teams under study faced a significant challenge in maintaining their professional autonomy in the community work secondary settings where their profession is not the core business. Could they continue to protect residents’ welfare while operating under the pressures imposed by funding bodies? This question directly related to the duties that community development workers were expected to perform and duties that were now being called into question. For these workers, their identity was deeply intertwined with their roles and responsibilities as community workers. The emotional distress they experienced when they were unable to fulfil these duties underscored the profound importance of their roles in the community, a responsibility they carried with utmost seriousness, highlighting the crucial role they played in society.

A ‘fateful moment’ is the time, either within or beyond an individual’s control, when ‘business as usual’ is disrupted, new perspectives are adopted, and “events come together in such a way that an individual stands at a crossroads in their existence or where a person learns of information with fateful

consequences” (Giddens, 1991, p. 113). To create a fateful moment, Giddens (1991) identified eight factors that need to exist: considering choices and actions, conducting a risk assessment, engaging in identity work, utilising expert systems, seeking advice, carrying out research, developing new skills, taking control and exercising agency. That is to say, identity work may be able to create fateful moments.

To go deeper into the concept of professional identity, I refer to Dent’s (2017) view that identity production and reproduction is a complex interplay of discourse, narrative, and representation. This process is deeply entwined with power relations, as discourse is a medium for transmitting and generating power. According to Foucault (1980), concepts of discourse in the professional context encompass languages, representations, communications, and practices. These elements, along with narrative and representation, play a crucial role in shaping the identity of the subjects of discourse (practitioners) or the field of knowledge (the work and organisation of social work within the public sector), emphasising the influence of power dynamics (Dent, 2017).

Language and communication are not just tools but significant forces in constructing a professional identity. As Ibarra and Barbulescu define it, “narrative identity work is the social effort to craft self-narratives that align with a person’s identity aims” (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010, p. 137). This work underscores the power of words and interactions in shaping professional identity and the responsibility that comes with it.



The narratives crafted by practitioners are not just stories but powerful tools that play a pivotal role in maintaining their professional identity. As Clandinin and Connelly (1999) observe, the professional knowledge landscape is a place of stories. These stories, or narratives, are the threads that weave the dynamic, shifting, and multiple identities that professionals acquire within this landscape. This underscores the power of storytelling in shaping and maintaining professional identity. Narrative identity, as a person's internalised and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future, provides a sense of unity and purpose (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The connection between identity formation and discourse is clear: practitioners, with their multifaceted identities, must engage with the dominant professional discourse to exercise power and influence in work settings or risk various forms of resistance (Dent, 2017).

Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) argued that narrative identity is vital and an active process for transition professionals. Self-narratives are potent instruments that bridge the gaps between old and new identities, offering a powerful tool for personal growth and change. Furthermore, provisional identity work allows professionals to exercise agency in that individuals adapt to new roles by actively experimenting with images that serve as trials for developing identities (Ibarra, 1999). This process of narrative identity work is not passive but actively engages professionals in meaning-making, enhancing their learning ability from each event. The ability of professionals to adapt to new roles through narrative identity work demonstrates their resilience and adaptability in the face of change.

The alignment between one's self-narrative, self-concept, and behaviour is a key factor in verifying the authenticity of the professional self. As Webb (2017b) suggests, this alignment reflects one's inner voice being in tune with one's feelings, guiding one to take the right action. This personal aspect of professional conduct is a crucial element in the logic of 'sentimental politics of authenticity', the second institutional logic of professional identity.

The interactions in social work within the studied social service teams required specific types of professional performance. These performances were crucial for the teams' survival through contract renewal. Some team members held subjective meanings of community development, such as the need for long-term relationships or the importance of community empowerment, that needed to be more realistic to be implemented in these settings. This expectation of community development creates a challenging situation where the contract-oriented performance and workers' authenticity are in opposing positions, leading to a struggle for many of these workers to maintain their authentic professional lives (Webb, 2017b).

Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand that practitioners will experience emotional discomfort if they cannot construct a coherent narrative (Ibarra, 1999). This is an 'ethical stress and disjuncture', the stress that practitioners experience when they cannot practice according to their values base (Fenton, 2015). Dealing with this ethical stress is part of narrative identity formation (Osteen, 2011). This understanding is crucial for providing practitioners the necessary support and empathy in their professional journey.

Practitioners can effectively convey social work values and mission through their authentic professional selves. Webb (2017b, p. 232) points out, “This unspeakable expectation of practitioners brings together the interplay of meaning and structure in professional life.”

The narrative identity of practitioners, a personal interpretation of their professional life, significantly influences their professional commitment. This commitment and their organisational commitment form the backbone of their professional life.

Professional commitment, defined as “one's attitude towards one's profession or vocation”(Blau, 1985, p. 20), is distinct from organisational commitment, which can be seen “as a measure, or indicator, of behaviour towards one's profession and the efforts invested in it”(Collins, 2015, p. 32). Professional commitment is intrinsic, developed through training and education, while organisational commitment is extrinsic (Clements, Kinman, & Guppy, 2014).

Identity is a passive reflection of one's psychological self, while commitment involves active engagement with behaviours, social exchange, and strategies. Authenticity, a personal trait that precedes commitment and influences how practitioners engage with their work, facilitates the alignment between practitioners' identities and their commitment to their professions and organisations.

When practitioners put their authenticity of professional self into an organisational context, tensions may arise in a social worker's commitment

to their organisation if there is a contradiction with their professional commitment. However, organisations can influence practitioners' self-construction of commitment if the commitments link to managerial objectives (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In this situation, practitioners are faced with a choice. If they engage in self-reflection, they can choose not to accept or challenge organisational mandates. Social workers can critically use various forms of resistance to maintain professional commitment. This resilience is demonstrated through challenging organisational policies, covert actions, and affiliating with colleagues, unions or professional collectives (Cheliotis, 2006; Collins, 2015). Unfortunately, some self-disciplined practitioners may commit to these managerial-driven discourses; that is to say, in this situation, practitioners themselves accomplish this organisational control (Collins, 2017).

Returning to its nature, professional identity is not a static construct but is actively built during practitioners' education, and it is further adapted and changed through practice. These experiences, when reflected upon, become part of the defining characteristic of practical wisdom or phronesis, a concept from Aristotelian philosophy that refers to the ability to make sound judgments in practical matters. That is to say, professional identity is evolving through practitioners' accumulation of experiences, and these experiences are essential in developing phronesis. As experience accumulation is inevitable in professional practice, we have reason to perceive phronesis as a valuable quality for practitioners. It equips them with the necessary tools to

address various challenges in practice during their identity work journey, making them feel prepared and capable.

As Crigger and Godfrey (2014) argue, professional identity is a complex interplay of social and psychological paradigms. Accordingly, the socialisation process, often called ‘Doing’, involves professionals adhering to the rules, standards, and codes of their discipline and society. Conversely, the psychological aspect, or ‘Being’, is about practitioners developing their character. This includes cultivating and internalising virtues such as courage, humility, forgiveness, integrity, and compassion.

In essence, practitioners grapple with questions like ‘Who am I as a professional in terms of values, and who am I in terms of knowledge?’ As Fossetøl (2018) points out, while ethics and knowledge are the two core aspects of professional self-understanding, the connection between professional ethics and professional wisdom truly defines professional identity. Hence, the connection between professional ethics and professional wisdom is crucial from a professional identity perspective and to our understanding of this interplay in professional life.

### **3.13 Phronesis, related concepts and applications**

Many social work researchers argue that the difficulties in social workers’ professional identities may be linked to the conventional Western knowledge paradigm and its focus on the technical–rational application of scientific theory and knowledge in professional practice (Fossetøl, 2018).

For example, the qualitative research, which explored professional self-understanding among Norwegian social workers employed at the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NLWA), revealed a significant finding. It found an ambivalent self-understanding concerning ethics and knowledge among the social workers. They tend to keep their professional ethical problems private, including ethical dilemmas and successful work. This phenomenon, termed 'privatising of professional ethical dilemmas' by Fossetøl (2018), reflects the ambiguous position of ethics in the dominant understanding of knowledge and the reduction of ethics that underlies this view.

The reduction of ethics refers to the tendency to downplay the importance of ethical considerations in professional decision-making, often in favour of technical or bureaucratic concerns. However, this research also holds the potential to transform the current understanding and practice of professional ethics in social work, offering a hopeful and optimistic perspective for the profession's future.

However, a different picture emerges if we shift our perspective and view professionalism as being linked to acknowledging both practical knowledge and ethics (Fossetøl, 2018). Professionalism is about exercising judgment that is concerned with paying attention to ethics. This shift in perspective not only challenges professionals to reconsider the role of ethics in their professional activity but also empowers them to realize that ethics could be at the core of professional practice. This realization should motivate professionals to reevaluate their current practices and strive for a more

ethical professional environment, with each playing a crucial and engaged role in this transformation.

In fact, social theorists have been aware that instrumentalist rationality, a mode of thinking that prioritises efficiency and practicality, has dominantly shaped the practices of people and institutions for an extended period. At the same time, its values permeated professional life; something morally significant was missing for professionals led by value-rationality.

Schwartz and Sharpe (2010, p. 9) highlight “a ‘wisdom deficit’ in current society, worsened by an overreliance on rules and incentives that modern institutions rely on in pursuit of efficiency, accountability, profit and good performance”. This deficit stresses the immediate need to address this issue, making it clear that action is required in the field.

Phronesis, a concept from ancient Greek philosophy that denotes practical wisdom or prudence in decision-making (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012a), is being reinvigorated. This resurgence, or the reconceptualization of professional knowledge that draws on phronesis in contemporary discourses on professional life (Jenkins, Kinsella, & DeLuca, 2018).

Phronesis, a “state of grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being” (Aristotle, 1999 edition, p. 154, quoted in Jenkins, Kinsella and Deluca, 2018, p.1), is a practical concept. It is used interchangeably with the English translation of phronesis as ‘prudence’ and with the contemporary phrase ‘practical wisdom’ (Jenkins

et al., 2018). Phronesis is an elusive ideal, a singular entity in a pluralistic world, making it a challenging concept to define (Jenkins et al., 2018).

In Aristotle's scheme, phronesis is one of the three 'intellectual virtues' (Eikeland, 2008). According to Flyvbjerg (2001), episteme is scientific, universal, invariable, context-independent knowledge. In contrast, techne is context-dependent, pragmatic, variable, and craft knowledge and is oriented toward practical instrumental rationality governed by a conscious goal. Aristotle (1975 edition, quoted in Kinsella and Pitman, 2012, p.2) distinguished phronesis from episteme and techne, which implies ethics involving deliberation that is based on values, concerned with practical judgement and informed by reflection.

Phronesis is pragmatic, variable, context-dependent, and oriented toward action (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012a). In short, Flyvbjerg (2001) suggests episteme is the 'know why', and techne is the 'know-how', whereas Aristotle thinks phronesis involves both. This reflection is a key aspect of phronesis, as it allows us to critically evaluate our values and actions and adjust our practical judgement accordingly.

When reinterpreting and applying phronesis today, we must be aware of the impact of contextual differences compared to Aristotle's period. The current world is encircled by class, ethnicity, and gender, which significantly influences any reconstitution of the notion of phronesis. This understanding is crucial for assumptions about what 'the good' and 'doing the good' might mean in different positions and contexts of those engaged in professional practices (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012a, p. 3).



Recent neo-Aristotelian analyses are pivotal in our comprehension of phronesis, revealing its four functions and the interplay between ethics, wisdom, and professional identity (Kristjánsson, 2024). The constitutive function of phronesis, the first of its four functions, is a cognitive process that enables the practitioner to perceive the ethically significant aspects of a situation and respond to them. It works in harmony with the practitioner's overall understanding, serving as a blueprint for professional success. The emotional regulative function of phronesis is another key aspect. It provides practitioners with a sense of emotional reassurance, aligning their emotional well-being with their understanding of the ethically significant aspects of their situation, their judgement, and their recognition of what is at stake. Phronesis also aids in integrating various components of a good life, especially when conflicting ethically significant considerations, virtues, or values come into play. Finally, phronesis, practical wisdom, plays a crucial role in adjudicating moral matters when conflicting requirements arise. It guides us in making 'blended' or 'synchronised' virtuous responses, a concept involving the simultaneous application of multiple virtues. This function of phronesis is a crucial aspect of professional development, equipping the person with the capability to make ethical decisions in complex situations.

Studies related to phronesis have been conducted in various professional disciplines, including social work, education, medicine, and nursing.

Notably, scholars such as Holmström (2014), Papouli (2019), and Petersén and Olsson (2014) have highlighted the crucial role of virtue ethics and phronetic knowledge in social work. Their work contributes to a rich

theoretical discussion on the relationship between practical wisdom and the profession, as seen in the studies by Cheung (2017,2022) and Chu and Tsui (2008).

Phronesis, or practical wisdom, is a concept that is frequently explored in studies addressing ethical issues. This practicality is identified in the work of Banks (2018), who linked phronesis with her developed concepts of 'ethics work' in social work practice. She discussed the use of 'professional ethical wisdom' in a psychiatric social work case, underlining the significant role of phronesis in social work practice.

Studies of phronesis also link with reflective practice and praxis. The object being analysed as praxis varies in terms of its range, from an incident to social service as a whole. For instance, in the study by Ferguson (2018), social service is perceived as praxis, a good practice. It is phronesis that comes in to encounter the domination of technical rationality, a key factor in shaping our social service practices.

Nevertheless, Thompson and West (2013) unveil the need for more research and discussion on the practical application of virtues in everyday practice, particularly in social work. They argue that this area requires more attention than other disciplines, such as medicine, nursing, education, and psychology. This call for further exploration and understanding not only engages the audience but also highlights the potential impact of their work on the field of social work, inspiring and motivating them to delve deeper into the topic.

Such research might still build on and be compared to the literature on phronesis in other professional fields. In the medical field, phronesis is a key factor in addressing ethical decision-making. For instance, in a study by Conroy et al. (2021), phronesis is presented as a non-prescriptive alternative approach for ethical decision-making when a doctor feels professionally vulnerable. This approach is based on the application of accumulated wisdom gained through previous practice dilemmas and decisions experienced by practitioners. The question of whether adequate opportunities are provided for acquiring phronesis in nursing training is also raised. Moreover, phronesis is believed to enhance professionalism in education by utilizing its wise, practical reasoning that suits the reflective nature of teaching activity (Plowright & Barr, 2012). The crafting of interventions to cultivate phronesis is an exciting area in phronesis and moral education (Kristjánsson, 2014). In the work of Florian and Graham (2014), phronesis is considered a tool for exploring questions about teacher decision-making concerning inclusive pedagogy and how phronesis might be taught.

Generally, diversified research on phronesis or practical wisdom has identified it as a human quality that significantly benefits professional life. However, the impact of wisdom on practitioners' professional life is an extension of their personal life. Clark and Volz (2012) argue that social workers must grasp the ethical issues that permeate everyday life, as this understanding is beneficial to their professional lives. As Clark (2000, pp. 18-19) states, "It is precisely because social work is charged with realising for clients the high aspirations of an ordinary life that social workers need a rather

deep and sophisticated understanding of the morality of daily life”. This understanding of daily life’s morality is not just beneficial; it empowers social workers, making them more knowledgeable and effective in their professional lives and stimulating them intellectually.

Phronesis is not a standalone concept; it is closely connected with two other important concepts, ‘aporia’ and ‘praxis’, which were developed by Aristotle. Firstly, aporia relates to the question, ‘Under what circumstances is phronesis called upon?’ It is an Aristotelian concept about practical wisdom, believed to apply to all practical reasoning (Macklin & Whiteford, 2012). According to Kinsella and Pitman (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012b), aporias are unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainties in professional practice. In such situations, phronesis, or practical wisdom, becomes crucial. There are “always moments of undecidability and decision, moments when one must act, even if the way forward is not clear, or more radically is uncertain” (Green, 2009, pp. 11-12, quoted in Kinsella and Pitman, 2012, p.166). Kinsella and Pitman (2012b) suggest practitioners should not avoid aporias; instead, they should embrace them by drawing on relevant epistemological knowledge rooted in attention to aporia, which the authors believe is an effective way to embrace the messiness of practice.

Secondly, as Kemmis (2012, p. 150) argues, “phronesis is what guides action, and praxis is the action”. Kemmis describes praxis as actions that stem from moral decisions made after careful deliberation. There are divergent views on the relationship between phronesis and praxis, each offering a unique and valuable perspective. Kemmis (2012) suggests that praxis is a prerequisite for

phronesis. He posits that through praxis, people develop phronesis because phronesis is shaped by experience and action. However, the conceptual boundary between these two dimensions is an ongoing debate. Kinsella and Pitman (2012a) propose that in a professional practice context, phronesis might be more aligned with morally committed thought, while praxis might be more about morally committed action. Nevertheless, the distinction between phronesis and praxis remains to be determined, highlighting the ongoing nature of the debate and the need for further contemplation and discussion.

Hence, combining 'phronesis', 'aporia', and 'praxis' can provide a rough image of the possible linear relationship of these three concepts in comprehending real-life situations. However, this is not the only interpretation. In this sense, phronesis plays a crucial role when aporias of practice emerge. Practitioners will use their practical wisdom to make judgements and decisions about delivering the best action for people's good; that is praxis.

Besides, phronesis implies ethics and is informed by reflection. According to Kinsella (2012), attention to reflection and judgement is key regarding processes of reflection oriented toward phronesis in professional practice. Informed by the reflective work of Donald Schön, Kinsella (2012) proposes a continuum of reflection that informs professional action. Accordingly, reflection has various forms: from 'receptive or phenomenological reflection (revealed in intelligent action)' to 'intentional cognitive reflection (based on reason)', 'embodied or tacit reflection', and 'critical reflexivity (critically challenge taken-for-granted understandings in professional life)'. Kinsella (2012) also considers six criteria that might be seen as helpful in orientating

practitioners toward phronetic or wise judgment in professional practice: pragmatic usefulness, persuasiveness, aesthetic appeal, ethical considerations, transformative potential, and dialogic intersubjectivity.

Reflexivity, a concept increasingly associated with phronesis in contemporary discourse (Kinsella, 2012), is crucial in challenging assumptions. Sandywell (1996, p. 14) defines reflexivity as “the act of interrogating interpretive systems”. It can be used to question how knowledge is constructed and the individual's assumptions about the world (Jenkins et al., 2018). Moreover, to deliberate and act effectively, a person with phronesis can critically examine assumptions, values, and beliefs in the context of the power dynamics prevalent within organizations (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Frank (2012, p. 63) suggests that “phronesis is not an inherent quality of isolated individuals but is always already relational or dialogical”. One’s phronesis becomes explicit when one actively engages in dialogues with others in their world, thereby challenging and refining one's assumptions.

Furthermore, Aristotle distinguishes intellectual virtues (such as wisdom, comprehension, and prudence) from moral virtues (including courage, liberality, ambition, truthfulness, wittiness, and justice). Aristotle suggests that “moral virtue concerns passions and actions, implying that the prudent person knows what they aim for and understands the virtues needed to achieve the correct action” (Aristotle, 2011 edition). In other words, practising these two virtues through reasoning and making choices are probably elements of social workers’ inner process - from assessing client’s needs and problems to selecting planned interventions and then implementing them.

Throughout this journey, they are inevitably required to address and resolve ethically difficult situations.

So far, the discussion on professionalism in this chapter has shed light on critical areas of ethics, autonomy, identity and practical wisdom in professional life with various challenges. Suppose social work is divided into quantitative and qualitative approaches (McBeath & Webb, 2002), in that case, the service context is heavily dominated by concepts and practices of regulation, standardization, and contracts belonging to the former. In contrast, applying situated approaches under a broader perspective of ethics constitutes the latter in practice as this is about 'being a professional' rather than only 'becoming a professional' (McBeath & Webb, 2002).

This research, which is focused on community work in the social work field, is driven by the need to offer practical solutions to the challenges to professionalism, particularly the ethics and autonomy of social workers within the service context under investigation. As such, after a review of relevant literature, I want to conclude the discussion by considering the views of two scholars about the application of situated approaches to ethics in professional life. Similarly, these discussions perceive phronesis as an additional intellectual virtue, which plays a crucial role in guiding our understanding and application of virtues. The first is McBeath's and Webb's (2002) discussion on the application of virtue ethics in social work, which is one view of knowledge of professional ethics. The second is Banks' (2018) 'professional ethical wisdom' to connect ethics and wisdom (originates in Aristotle's notion of 'phronesis') in social welfare work.

First of all, the central focus of virtue ethics is on the qualities of the individual moral agent; these qualities would be desirable in societies if individuals possessed them and used them for the well-being of that society. (McBeath & Webb, 2002). Some moral qualities regarded as important for human service practitioners are “professional wisdom, care, respectfulness, trustworthiness, justice, courage and integrity” (Banks & Gallagher, 2009, p. 1). McBeath and Webb (2002) argue that virtues are a reliable guide, ensuring that social workers’ actions are in line with society’s best interests, thereby promoting the societal desirability of virtues. In this context, the actions of social workers have profound impacts, not only on their clients but also on the overall well-being of society. This expectation is further elaborated as the generalizable capacities of social workers (moral agents); their morality stems from their disposition to make good judgments and perceptions. Therefore, virtue ethics underscores the expression and application of virtues by the worker rather than strict adherence to a moral rule.

Linking with Aristotelian theory, the aim of using virtue ethics in social work is associated with the moral agent’s knowledge of the meaning of life. It is about “practising a form of life within a community that redounds to the benefit of and enhances the quality of that life and the political and socio-economic environments surrounding it” (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1025). A virtuous social worker is expected to be able to identify “the factors constituting good judgement leading to good ends that accord with a holistic conception of the good life” (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1031). In other words, social work practice under virtue ethics is to reconcile the purposes and practices of



social work with a eudaimonic form of life (happiness via virtue) in the professional community.

This requirement implies that practical wisdom is crucial capacity practitioners need in social work practice under the virtue ethical approach. This emphasis on practical wisdom ensures that social workers are not just knowledgeable, but also enlightened in their practice.

Importantly, McBeath and Webb (2002) propose that the workers' authentic inner selves mediate between virtues and action, forming the personal aspect of ethical decision-making. In other words, the virtue ethics approach also relies on the worker's conscience, which can be tested when workers can face and act out their authentic selves. This quality essentially demands a function of reflection, self-understanding, and self-monitoring of workers. Therefore, virtuous social workers can show and reflect upon inner qualities commonly available in variable situations. These virtues generated from one's inner self, in turn, act as society's conscience, influencing collective behaviour and values, and thereby shaping and reproducing society.

On the other hand, Banks (2018) connects ethics and wisdom (originating in Aristotle's notion of 'phronesis') in professional life. 'Professional ethical wisdom' refers to the wisdom practised in the ethical sphere of professional life. Professional ethical wisdom encompasses promoting human and ecological flourishing, including harms, benefits, rights, and responsibilities. Besides, there is a basket of human qualities associated with it, such as "mental agility, perceptual acuity, sensitivity to context, courage, commitment, good judgement, practical knowledge, collaborative working

and appreciation of the broader political context in which they [practitioners] operate”(Banks, 2018). Banks echoes Aristotle’s interpretations, stating that the ethical or moral is part of the meaning of phronesis, in the sense that the concept of wisdom includes a meaning of morality while wisdom is also a quality that enhances moral capacity and can assist the work of judgment. Significantly, phronesis involves a function of ordering moral virtues. As a key player in this process, practical wisdom is required to balance and unify diverse virtues. This means that in a given situation, practical wisdom helps determine which virtues are most relevant and how they should be applied, providing a reassuring and confident framework for ethical decision-making. Furthermore, practical wisdom has both internal and external facets; internally, it involves a process of reflection and deliberation, whereas externally, it is achieved via verbal and written communication with other people. Practical wisdom becomes visible only at moments of confrontation when something significant is at stake. So, professional ethical wisdom as a disposition must always be at work even though it may not be visible. Hence, the concept of ‘ethics work’ is the practice of ethics and the transformation of professional ethical wisdom into action (Banks, 2013a, 2016). ‘Ethics work’ is grounded in features of phronesis, making it an adaptation of the philosophical concept of phronesis for more professional and sociological purposes.

Although the resurgence of interest in using phronesis and exploring various aspects of the concept are identified in the literature, in facing complex and changing contexts where professional practice is located (Pitman & Kinsella,

2019), an 'anti-phronesis' situation "about overriding the claims of practical wisdom in favour of routines that have been decided on without reference to the situation at hand exists" (Frank, 2012, p. 58). This draws attention to the grounds for practitioners to use situated judgment and practical wisdom, which may sometimes be perceived as hostile due to the economic rationalities that guide professional practice. For those who use phronesis, reacting to this force requires identifying what Aristotle referred to as the balance point, the mean, between competing interests (Jenkins et al., 2018). By finding this balance point, we may be able to manage the potential benefits of phronesis, offering a more optimistic view of the future of professional practice.

### **3.14 Concluding remarks**

Professionalism is the backdrop of this research, contextualising the study's focus and findings about professional autonomy, professional ethics, professional identity, and practical wisdom (phronesis). As a third logic alongside the state bureaucracy and market, professionalism plays a social coordination role. It interplays with and is influenced by the other two forces. In the ongoing changing and complex service context and neo-liberal climate impacted by globalisation and new public management, professionals' day-to-day practice can be shaped and determined through an organisational-professional arena – the interplay between macro-level and micro-level ethics. The literature shows that, on the micro-level, the space for exercising professional autonomy has been reduced, service ideals of professions are

challenged, and professional identity is in crisis. Under these challenges in professional life, it is important that professional ethics moves towards a broad and situated perspective. It can be seen that a pragmatic and balanced approach to maintaining autonomy is vital. Practitioners' authenticity is critical in producing and reproducing their professional identity. At the same time, the resurgence of practical wisdom may be a beacon of hope in professional lives and for the continuing development of the profession.

# Chapter 4 Methodology

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter illustrates and explains the methodology used throughout this grounded theory research, which aims to theorise a social process on practitioners' maintaining and exercising their professional autonomy in community work secondary settings (CWSS). This research mainly employed semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect participants' accounts on handling ethically difficult situations in practice. Since my insider's role was one of the significant factors influencing the methodology chosen and various study components, I, as the researcher, will first inform readers about this role. This chapter will give further details on the methodology chosen, including its philosophical position and limitations. Furthermore, this chapter consists of the research objectives, methodology, sampling scheme, data analysis, and theorising work, an expected product of this grounded theory research.

## 4.2 Researcher as an insider

This study was undertaken by me, an insider researcher familiar with the research field CWSS because of my prolonged involvement. The identity of an insider researcher has mainly developed from my professional background in several dimensions.

First, I possessed substantial experience in practising social work in secondary settings. I had been a social worker stationed in secondary schools for eight years. During that period, I dealt with many cases that involved complicated school dynamics in the secondary schools I served. These dynamics emerged among students, their parents, teachers, school personnel, social work supervisors, as well as other stakeholders throughout the helping processes in which I was striving for students' welfare. These

hands-on experiences equipped me with knowledge and skills in exercising and protecting my professional autonomy. As a result, I built a frontline worker's sensitivity to addressing social work dilemmas and ethically difficult situations in secondary settings.

During the period 2004-2020, I carried a social work supervisor's role in a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and commenced to manage the Urban Renewal Social Service Team (URSST), Social Services Teams in Buildings Department (BDSST) and other community projects, which were operating in CWSS. This duty required me to monitor the implementation of service agreements between my agency and the funding bodies. At the same time, I was responsible for supporting my colleagues, including senior managers and frontline workers, taking care of residents' interests and welfare, and resolving social work dilemmas when there was a conflict of interest between the residents and the funding bodies. I was also actively involved in the community work sector through chairing and seating in related committees and groups in the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS), a coordinating platform for NGOs in Hong Kong's social welfare sector.

Meanwhile, I had long been directly or indirectly involved in various dilemma situations as I served as a mediator between my agency, my colleagues, the funding bodies, the residents as well as interest groups. This condition was very intense during the public consultation of the urban renewal strategies review conducted between 2008 and 2010. The dilemmas openly raised by affected residents, interest groups and frontline social workers were focused mainly on whether the Urban Renewal Social Service Team (URSST) could play an independent role in practice. That was a critical period when those interest groups challenged the determination of URSST to protect professional autonomy and queried if my agency and our team members were loyal to those affected residents served.

Having changed from being a frontline social worker to a manager supervising community work teams in CWSS, I had to face a considerable number of

personal challenges. I sensed that I was so close to the mechanisms of justice, which critically influenced residents' welfare and personal interests. I noticed the shift from working in schools in an educational system to an urban renewal system where there was a salient interfacing between political issues and welfare issues. To a certain extent, it was because the interests of residents were not purely about welfare but a large amount of monetary compensation; social workers found it difficult to make professional judgements in the helping process. This situation was further complicated when organisations in civil society perceived these teams as an arm of the authority implementing highly controversial policies. I had even made some challenging judgements in handling dilemma situations earlier when I supervised these teams, directing me to search for my professional identity and conscience through continuous self-reflection and correction.

While conducting this study, I was still managing community work teams in secondary settings. Coincidentally, a URSST I managed was involved in a case included in this study (details refer to section 4.9 in this chapter). All these experiences have equipped me with disciplinary perspectives to understand issues relating to the social worker's professional autonomy when practising in CWSS. I was very much an 'insider researcher' in the sense of being a member of the community of practitioners (community workers in secondary settings) in which I was conducting my research. In summary, I, as an insider researcher in this study, have the following characteristics:

1. I was familiar with the overall context of the studied area.
2. I was sensitive to ethical issues in secondary settings.
3. I could ask participants relevant questions to identify and fill theoretical gaps during data collection.
4. I had an inevitable subjectivity in relation to the researched area.

Overall, I played three roles during the entire research period: a researcher, a professional in CWSS, and a supervisor in my organization. I engaged in the insider researcher's role when these roles interacted due to the research work.

In general, participants in the research seemed to recognise that I could conduct myself professionally as a researcher and genuinely care for their concerns. When they shared their difficulties and suffering in the settings, I felt their trust in me. This deep understanding fostered an environment of trust, enabling our interviewees to delve into their experiences, thereby ensuring high-quality data collection.

However, my identity as a supervisor in an NGO sometimes triggered participants' defensive behaviours during interviews, especially when we were discussing sensitive topics. In these instances, I made a conscious effort to demonstrate my openness and non-judgemental attitude, reassuring them that our discussions were for the betterment of the professional as a whole and that their responses would be anonymised. This approach helped to steer our conversations back on the right track.

Notably, my dual role as a supervisor and researcher revealed a significant finding – participants rarely shared their difficulties in their day-to-day practice. This included hidden actions and private thoughts and feelings, which they found challenging to communicate honestly to their supervisors due to the trust issue in their workplace. However, my dual role seemed to encourage them to open up.

On the other hand, some participants might think I did not belong to their groupings. For example, I was regarded as belonging when the grouping was the field, the CWSS, whereas I did not 'belong' when participants were frontline workers, and I was seen as being in the position of a supervisor. In other words, although I believed I had carried the insider researcher's role successfully, I kept entering and exiting this role during the research process, which was unavoidable. I realised that the impact of this role on the research



process and outcome, either positive or negative, was constantly being co-constructed by the participants and by me and sought to engage reflexively with this changing positionality within these relationships.

As an insider researcher, I have faced a significant challenge involving two of the participants, who are frontline workers of my responsible unit, although I was not their immediate supervisor (details refer to section 4.9 of this chapter). The complexity of handling my insider researcher role was far greater than interviewing other participants, particularly the role interchanging from the researcher (insider) to their senior-level manager (outsider). When they shared their accounts on the research topic, they would inevitably share some things that I, as a manager, would have different thoughts from my position. My response in this situation was to focus on my researcher's role and be indifferent to that 'sensitive' content. Even though talking about areas relating to the studied topics, I realised that participants might not tell me wholly about what had happened for their consideration for the same reason.

Despite the challenges, it was important to note that the trust between the two participants and me was not absent, but rather a matter of degree. I could sense the common values we shared, and this understanding allowed us to work together to improve the service studied by exploring what was happening in the field. We all agreed that the incident we were involved in was a precious opportunity to delve into.

Overall, the insider position I brought to this research has advantages and disadvantages, as discussed in the literature (Lotty, 2021). Accordingly, on the one hand, this position enables researchers to gain access to participants and build trust and relationships with them owing to researchers' in-depth understanding of the studied field. Nevertheless, on the other hand, there is a potential risk of bias and becoming subjective, since it may be difficult for researchers to separate their experiences from participants. In this research it was very important for me to be constantly vigilant about the potential for me to see the situations faced by the workers narrowly, through the lens of a

practitioner myself and to look for data that might confirm my own experiences and expectations. It was also important to know that participants might be holding back some information if they saw me as someone in a supervisory or managerial role. I also was very aware of my need to maintain participants' anonymity.

### **4.3 Research questions and objectives**

My hands-on experiences made me concerned with social workers' professional autonomy in CWSS. This was because most secondary settings and even some primary settings in Hong Kong were not favourable enough for social workers to exercise their professional autonomy. These limitations to professional autonomy arose due to tensions between social workers' loyalty to residents and their accountability to funding bodies and their employing agencies, mainly when there was a conflict of interest between the funding bodies and the residents.

Although I was practising in the field during the research process, I could only understand the situations and issues of my own agency. I was still puzzled by the overall phenomenon and the challenges faced by practitioners in the wider field.

Hence, the core research question at the beginning stage of this study was, 'What is going on in the complicated process by which social workers exercise their professional autonomy in secondary settings?' I also developed further research questions as follows:

1. How do social workers practising in the studied social service teams, which consist of welfare and political elements, perceive professional autonomy?
2. What social, organisational and political factors are influencing the studied social service teams' social workers' professional autonomy?

3. Are the studied social service teams' social workers aware of the situation if their professional autonomy is threatened under the power relationships generated by the funding mechanism?
4. How do the studied social service teams' social workers react when they are aware that their professional autonomy may be threatened?
5. What approach do the studied social service teams' social workers use in making ethical decisions?

These questions were designed to identify an unknown social process appearing in this CWSS context. Consequently, this research aimed to thoroughly understand the studied area by generating a substantive contextualised theory that reflects the reality of how social workers in the social service teams in the CWSS understand and exercise their professional autonomy in making ethical decisions. The specific research objectives regarding these two social service teams are elaborated below:

1. To understand social workers' perceptions and definitions of professional autonomy in making ethical decisions.
2. To examine the process by which social workers exercise their professional autonomy in making ethical decisions in secondary settings.
3. To investigate how social workers cope when someone threatens their professional autonomy.
4. To transfer the knowledge identified by this research to recommendations that can facilitate ethical practice in CWSS or a wider social work context.

#### **4.4 Methodology and philosophical position: the use of grounded theory**

As mentioned in preceding chapters, in CWSS, there was limited space for social workers to exercise their professional autonomy. This situation emerged in Hong Kong in the early 2000s when organisations beyond the social welfare sector funded more and more community work projects.

However, there was little understanding of this phenomenon's actual operation, features and characteristics. Although there was a potential risk that the social service team's autonomy would be threatened, understanding what, when and how it would happen was unknown. That is to say, the characteristics of the phenomenon to be studied at the research design stage had not been developed to an obvious level. Although there were informal platforms for social workers to exchange their concerns in serving residents living in old urban areas, time spent tackling professional autonomy in CWSS was limited and relevant documentation of this sharing was lacking. The understanding of this research topic was limited. This phenomenon had been a new, developing, but complex issue, about which little was discussed by practitioners in Hong Kong.

To answer the research questions, it would be important to get access to detailed accounts of social workers' experiences, reasoning, and perspectives on their work and relationships with local people and their employers. Unlike the positivist paradigm that seeks to predict outcomes, qualitative research draws from interpretive aims to understand a research subject deeply by building knowledge from understanding individuals' viewpoints and the attached meaning (Tomaszewski, Zarestky, & Gonzalez, 2020). Therefore, to see the subject anew, an interpretive qualitative methodology has been selected in this study because it can offer new insights (Richards & Morse, 2012). I realised that the research methodology selected needed to be internally consistent and rigorous and that there should be

alignment between the phenomenon, research questions and data collection (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

In addition, the question of whether the methodology would fit the study of the phenomenon and facilitate attaining the research objectives (to build up a contextualised theory of the studied issue) was significant. I explored several common qualitative methods, assessing their suitability for this study in the first place. Methodologies eventually not chosen had their particular limitations. For example, participatory action research was not feasible as no space was allowed to involve participants to take action to bring about changes in this studied topic. Narrative inquiry was inappropriate because my aim was not to study participants' stories that have caused a change within the person or specific situation (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019). I also explored phenomenological approaches to research, as these are often used when exploring a larger concept or idea. However, except for one-to-one interviews, it was not feasible for me to use observations in secondary settings (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

A case study approach was near my selection requirement as it aims to examine a case's particularity and complexity and understand its activities and particular circumstances (Stake, 1995). However, it needs to incorporate multiple sources and types of evidence, which was not feasible in this research (Yin, 2017).

Eventually, since I aimed to understand this phenomenon by building up a context-specific or contextualised theory, the grounded theory method (GTM) was chosen as the methodology of this research because the core research question of GTM – what is going on in the process – fits this study. GTM also serves to build a theory that explicates a phenomenon, specifies concepts that categorise the relevant phenomenon, explains relationships between ideas and provides a framework for making predictions (Charmaz, 1990). Last but not least, GTM is the only method to build and create contextual theory from data among other primary qualitative research methods (Richards &

Morse, 2012). At this point, as a researcher, I had a personal interest in building up a theory to explicate the phenomenon studied. I believe some qualitative methodologies could explore the phenomenon at different levels in terms of depth. However, I desired to unfold this phenomenon we knew little about by sketching a relatively completed picture under a specific and unique context. This understanding must be a good starting point for further studies and exploration.

Overall, the grounded theory method provides a detailed, rigorous, and systematic method of analysis; it has the advantage of not requiring the researcher to conceive preliminary hypotheses and hence provides the researcher with greater freedom to explore the research area and allow issues to emerge (Bryant, 2002; Glaser, 1978). Jones and Alony (2011) summarise the benefits offered by GTM as follows:

1. Its capacity to interpret complex phenomena.
2. Its accommodation of social issues.
3. Its appropriateness for socially constructed experiences.
4. It is imperative for emergence.
5. It is free from the constraints of a priori knowledge.
6. Its ability to fit with different types of researchers.

I realise that Grounded theory has many critiques and limitations. However, I will first outline its development and the different versions currently available before discussing its limitations.

In the early 1960s' in the United States, inductive qualitative inquiry in sociology only employed life histories, case studies and participant observation, while positivism was the dominant paradigm of inquiry in natural science (Charmaz, 2014). Under this context, the two sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*:

*Strategies for Qualitative Research* in 1967, which refocused qualitative inquiry on methods of analysis and advocated developing theories from research grounded in data rather than deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories (Charmaz, 2014).

In 1978, in his book *Theoretical Sensitivity*, Glaser further developed the ideas of the original version, which, in the long run, became the well-known classic grounded theory (Flick, 2018). Grounded theory has developed in divergent directions since then. In 1987, Strauss commenced developing his approach to *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. It was further developed in his work with Corbin, his co-author of *Basics of Qualitative Research*, in 1990. This pushed grounded theory towards methods of verification, which “favour applying additional technical procedures rather than emphasizing emergent theoretical categories and the comparative methods that distinguished earlier grounded theory strategies” (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 11-12). This version provoked strong critiques from Glaser.

The third main type of grounded theory method was developed by Kathy Charmaz, using the label ‘Constructivist Grounded Theory’. Charmaz’s book *Constructing Grounded Theory*, originally in 2006, integrated Strauss, Corbin and Glaser into an extended version of grounded theory (Flick, 2018). The term ‘constructivist’ acknowledges subjectivity and the researcher’s involvement in constructing and interpreting data. This version “adopts the inductive, comparative emergent, and open-ended approach of Glaser’s and Strauss’ original statement but it highlights the flexibility of the method and resists mechanical applications of it” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13). It has been a contemporary version of the grounded theory, which shifted its original epistemological foundations by bringing subjectivity into view and assumed that people construct the realities in which they participate; constructivists acknowledge that their interpretation of the studied phenomenon was itself a construction (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014, p. 310) explained that constructivist grounded theory “assumes the relativism of multiple social

realities, recognises the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed and aims toward an interpretive understanding of subject meanings”.

As Walsham (1995) stated, socially constructed knowledge requires an interpretive approach to inquiry; this renders its interpretation subjective and value-laden (Galal, 2001). Therefore, data are acquired as composite social constructions of the researcher, along with the socially constructed views of those who are being studied (Walsham, 1995). Van Maanen (1979) divided this composite into first and second-order concepts. First-order components are the artefacts presented by the subject of the research. Second-order components are the constructions of the researcher – these lead to the theories the researcher develops to explain the phenomena under study. A grounded theory provides a means of assembling and sorting first order by looking for patterns and saturation. The grounded theory also provides a means of drawing out second-order concepts through processes of abstraction (Fernández & Lehmann, 2005).

Charmaz (2014, p. 14) saw the main versions of grounded theory as “constituting a constellation of methods, rather than an array of different methods”. This is because although researchers may have different conceptual agendas in different versions of grounded theory, they all begin with “inductive logic, subject their data to rigorous comparative analysis, aim to develop theoretical analyses, and value grounded theory studies for informing policy and practice”(Charmaz, 2014, p. 14).

Willig (2013) pointed out two versions of GTM: the full version and the abbreviated version. Accordingly, the full implementation of the method means the researcher moves back and forth between data collection and analysis. When using the full version, the researcher first explores the data through initial open coding, establishes tentative linkages between categories, and then returns to the field to collect further data. Data collection is progressively focused and informed by the emerging theory throughout theoretical sampling. The researcher can push outwards and seek out



manifestations of categories and opposites and negative cases until the research questions are answered. This version gives the researcher confidence that theoretical saturation is being approached (Willig, 2013).

In contrast, an abbreviated version only involves data coding (Willig, 2013). The researcher has no opportunity to leave the confines of the original data set to broaden and refine the analysis. Interview transcripts or other documents are analysed following the principles of grounded theory; some features of GTM, like theoretical sensitivity, theoretical saturation, and negative case analysis, can only be implemented within the texts that are being analysed.

In this study, I retained the following strategies (Sbaraini, Carter, Evans, & Blinkhorn, 2011, p. 3) of grounded theory:

1. Simultaneous collection and analysis of data to allow theoretical sampling.
2. A specific data coding process and comparative methods. Codes are combined and related to each other at a high level of abstraction and are referred to as categories or concepts.
3. Memo writing about events, cases, categories, or relationships between categories throughout the study to stimulate and record those that contribute to developing thinking.
4. Sampling to refine emerging theoretical ideas and integrate the theoretical framework

Overall, I first positioned myself to build up a context-specific theory, which clearly focused on studying the CWSS. I also conducted theoretical sampling consciously and carefully so as to fill up theoretical links between the categories constructed in the process. One example was studying the Chun Tin incident, although a role conflict existed between the participants and me.

Owing to my familiarity with the field, I understood how rare and precious the incident was, so the contribution of looking deeply into this case would probably be helpful in exploring the theoretical possibilities of the research. In fact, in this study, I made an effort to maintain GTM's creative potential by being flexible enough to respond to the data. Therefore, I have tried out most strategies of GTM throughout the research process rather than just employing these strategies to analyse data after collection.

#### **4.5 Critiques and limitations of the Grounded Theory Method**

As with all qualitative methods, GTM has its specific critiques. The role of induction and discovery versus construction has been a significant point of debate in grounded theory research (Willig, 2013). Initially, GTM was criticized for its prescriptiveness in producing detailed and procedural guides to the method, which led to a perceived downplaying of the researcher's creativity, with a focus on explication, organization, and presentation of the data rather than discovering order within the data (Willig, 2013). Other criticisms included a lack of reflexivity, premature commitment to analytic categories, unnecessary jargon, and clarity about key terms such as theory, category, and saturation (Charmaz, 1990).

My approach to addressing GTM's critiques and limitations was rooted in the principles of reflexivity and creativity. I took Pidgeon and Henwood's (1997) suggestion to continually review each phase of the research process, thereby increasing reflexivity. This process allowed me to demonstrate how my assumptions, values, sampling decisions, analytic technique, and interpretations of context have shaped the research. As an insider researcher, my creativity in this study was stimulated by my practice and management experience in the researched context and by the theoretical sensitivity it produced. This theoretical sensitivity influenced the direction of the theoretical sampling and the shaping of the context-specific theory. I realised that my interaction with the participants and the data collected was just one

interpretation of the social process community workers were experiencing in CWSS when engaging with professional autonomy. Therefore, producing a context-specific theory is not the absolute truth but one interpretation of the data.

#### **4.6 Theoretical framework**

As an inductive and theory discovery methodology, GTM “allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data” (Martin & Turner, 1986, p. 141). In short, “induction is a type of reasoning that begins with studying a range of individual cases and extrapolates patterns from them to form a conceptual category” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 343).

Grounded theorists may use sensitising concepts to study the empirical world while retaining openness to explore study interests. The functions of sensitising concepts are as follows (Blumer, 1986; Charmaz, 2008):

1. Forming a loose frame for looking at research interests, guiding and providing a place to start the inquiry.
2. Developing ideas about processes to be defined in the data and research topics.
3. Prevent insider researchers from ignoring certain studied areas because of their prejudice.

As aforementioned, social workers practising in CWSS faced dilemmas that they needed to resolve by making ethical decisions. Hence, at the beginning of this study, I selected ethical decision-making as a focal point to examine the process in which social workers exercised their professional autonomy in CWSS. I believed that social workers’ engagement with ethics was a researchable subject. This research employed a broader approach to examine professional ethics. In short, as Banks (2009, p. 59) stated, “Ethics as a study

area is embedded in the life whilst ethics as values and norms are lived in, and through the life”. The ‘Ethics in Professional Life’ concept was therefore used as a frame to identify relevant sensitising concepts for starting the inquiry. Since ethical decision-making was a focal point in investigating how practitioners exercise their professional autonomy in secondary settings (the process), ethical decision-making was reasonably selected as one of the sensitising concepts. The other two elements of ‘Ethics in Professional Life’, namely commitment and character, were selected as other seeds of sensitising concepts. I used these sensitising concepts to set guiding questions for both the focus group and semi-structured in-depth interviews (see Appendix).

#### **4.7 Ethics approval**

Before data collection, ethical approval was sought from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Sociology (the former School of Applied Social Sciences). Key considerations outlined in the ethics form are as follows:

1. The research was conducted in an indoor venue outside the respondents’ workplaces, which allowed privacy and is low risk (e.g., an interview room or meeting room).
2. The participants were professional social workers, who generally would not be considered vulnerable. However, in this research context, some of them, whose activities might include some organising/community action that conflicts with authority decisions, might need some form of protection (see point 5 below).
3. Informed consent would be obtained from all participants regarding the research purpose, including the willingness to participate, how

data would be used, audiotaping, and dissemination. They would be offered the chance to withdraw at any time.

4. The participants in the focus groups would be asked to agree on confidentiality regarding any potentially sensitive or personal information discussed in those groups.
5. The researcher would anonymise respondents and organisations and review any confidential information that might be recognisable with participants before publishing. The researcher would need to be sensitive about presenting negative comments about employers, funding bodies and other relevant organisations to ensure respondents are not recognised.

#### **4.8 Sampling strategies and data collection**

Since the CWSS was a new phenomenon and was not categorised into mainstream services in the Hong Kong welfare sector, there was no official record of its existing profile. I had to collect and organise this information by asking practitioners of respective individual teams and counterchecking with relevant funding bodies through their annual reports and official websites. The table below (Table 1) shows all operators (as of March 2016) and estimated total numbers of social workers who could be sampled from various CWSS.

**Table 1: Profile of Social Service Teams in Community Work Secondary Settings**

<b>Name of Service Team</b>	<b>Service users</b>	<b>No. of operators (NGO)</b>	<b>No. of social workers</b>	<b>Service since</b>	<b>Source of funding</b>
Urban Renewal Social Service Teams	Residents and shop owners affected by the urban renewal project	3	15	2001	Urban Renewal Authority (2001-2010) Urban Renewal Fund (since 2011)
Social Services Teams in the Buildings Department	Owners/occupants affected by the Department's enforcement actions	4	28	2002	Buildings Department
Out-reaching Support Service for Minority Owners in Prospective Compulsory Sale Cases	Minority owners of old buildings, who are affected by compulsory sale under the Land Ordinance	1	8	2011	Development Bureau
Social Service Teams at the New Development Areas	Residents and stakeholders affected by the rural development	2	5	2014	Civic Engineering and Development Department
Housing Advisory and Service Team	New tenants of public rental housing estates	1	10	2008 Until 2013	Housing Authority
<b>Total</b>		<b>11</b>	<b>66</b>		

Notably, the topic of this research and its scope of investigation touched on social workers' professional autonomy during practice, and unavoidably, this theme relates to the experiences of participants, their supervisors and funding bodies, so agencies might not want to disclose such sensitive information to a third person. It was understandable that those agencies, for the sake of their agencies' interests, might not be eager to recruit participants, and there was a possibility that participants would be screened, and the quality of participants, in turn, would be adversely affected. Hence, it was not feasible to recruit participants through these agencies officially.

An alternative of open recruitment through the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS) was considered, but eventually, this option was not used because it would have a similar effect as if officially recruited through an individual agency because HKCSS probably would recruit participants through individual organisations.

Eventually, four participants (N=4) were recruited to join the focus group, and ten participants (N=10) were recruited for in-depth interviews through my network (key contacts) in the community work sector. This approach could address the disadvantages of recruitment through agencies where participants would be screened. Of course, there was still a bias owing to participants' personal experience in the setting. Hence, I directly contacted the referred participants to make an assessment. Key contacts who helped in recruitment included frontline practitioners and team managers in the field. These key contacts first asked the potential participants about their interest in joining interviews. The contacts then referred those interested participants to me, who gave direct phone contact to explain and clarify the study. I then sent them the participant information sheet and consent form if they agreed to join the interview. All of them joined this study voluntarily. The interviews were conducted after office hours. These participants mainly came from the Social Service Teams in the Buildings Department and Urban Renewal Social Service Teams, which are the two largest teams in the sector.

Although theoretical sampling was used throughout different stages of this research to guide the researcher's progress, at the beginning stage, initial sampling got the researcher started by establishing sampling criteria for participants and settings before entering the field.

First, I employed purposive sampling to recruit participants to a focus group aimed at identifying the scope and determining the dimensions and boundaries of the researched area. Community workers with at least three years of working experience in secondary settings were recruited to join the focus group. Three years was believed to be long enough for practitioners to go through an entire work cycle in settings where they could earn substantial experience for making personal reflections. The three-year criterion was also applied to subsequent in-depth interviews.

A focus group can gather participants from different settings to share their views on one topic – about professional autonomy – in the field. Participants can exchange their views on the topic, and the researcher can observe the overall dynamic and tensions among participants.

After the focus group interview (N=4), I decided to mainly select only the Urban Renewal Social Service Team (URSST) and the Social Service Team in the Buildings Department (BDSST) as the studied units among the six service teams in the community work secondary settings (CWSS) listed in Table 1, although it turned out that there was one participant who came from one of the other teams. The critical consideration was the difficulty recruiting participants caused by the small sampling frame aforementioned in CWSS. The Housing Advisory Team had only four years of history, and it ceased operation in 2012, thus it was difficult to contact its former small numbers of team member for an interview. Meanwhile, the other two teams, namely Outreaching Support Service for Minority Owners in Prospective Compulsory Sale Cases and Social Service Teams at the New Development Areas, were solely operated by two individual organisations. I had approached social workers from these teams but in vain. One worker stated that social workers



in the team were forbidden to join any research interview, as stated in the service contract. However, the reason for this was unknown. Another social worker disclosed that she was uncomfortable giving an interview for fear that her employer would discover it. In contrast, both the URSST and BDSST were established in the early 2000s, and the number of social workers employed by these two types of teams has an approximately 65% share of the overall labour market of CWSS, based on the figure in Table 1.

However, in the focus group, only four participants came from the two largest social service teams (URSST and BDSST). This low response alerted me to the possible difficulty of recruiting practitioners for in-depth interviews from other social service teams with less history. While the focus group was helpful in gaining some initial responses on professional autonomy, given the low level of response and engagement in the focus group, I did not allow the findings from this focus group to determine the subsequent research but instead continued to ask open semi-structured questions and make use of theoretical sampling in the interviews going forward.

On the other hand, the semi-structured interview is a common method used in qualitative research to generate data. Choice of data collection can help researchers to answer research questions. The research questions of this research were about workers' professional autonomy, which was a very personal and subjective experience. My concern was to avoid forcing the responses. Therefore, an open-ended interview guide was designed to explore the topic. Finally, intensive interviews can also "combine flexibility and control, open interactional space for ideas and issues to arise, and allow possibilities for immediate follow-up on ideas and issues, resulting from interviewer's and interviewees' co-construction of the interview" (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 58-59). An overview of demographics for all participants (N=10) of in-depth interviews is shown in the following table (Table 2):

**Table 2: Demographics of participants of in-depth interviews**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>BD Group</b>	<b>UR Group</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	6	3	2	1
Male	4	1	3	0
<b>Social Work Experiences</b>				
3-5 years	2	0	2	0
6-10 years	2	2	0	0
11-15 years	3	1	1	1
16-20 years	3	2	1	0
<b>Social Service Team Experiences (3-5 Years)</b>	10	5	4	1

#### **4.9 Theoretical sampling**

In GTM, theoretical sampling is a pivotal strategy that aims to gather more pertinent data that focuses on the category and its properties in order to elaborate and refine the category in the emerging theory. Theoretical sampling is specific and systematic. Conducting theoretical sampling depends on the extent of the category that a researcher has already identified (Charmaz, 2014).

The first time I employed theoretical sampling in this research was after the first four semi-structured in-depth interviews, through which I identified a category relating to participants having ambivalence about performing their professional role, particularly in employing the community work approach. Accordingly, workers even had a moral dilemma if they did not use the

community work approach. In some of these units, using community work was even taboo. “As pieces of the puzzle are identified, a grounded theory researcher might have stops and starts along the path” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 193). As I was puzzled by this category, the original hypothesis and the research questions were changed from ‘What is going on in the complicated process by which social workers exercise their professional autonomy?’ to ‘Why did social workers dare not to employ a community approach in a CWSS?’ Hence, I sought events or cases that could illuminate the categories by adding new participants throughout the research process to inquire about experiences that had not been covered before. The identification of this knowledge gap prompted me to purposefully recruit and add participants who could employ a community work approach in secondary settings to capture the factors behind the phenomenon and compare the differences, if any, with those settings that did not favour using a community work approach, as found in the first four interviews.

At the time the so-called ‘Chun Tin Street incident<sup>6</sup>’ occurred in the CWSS sector in November 2016. This case was about a URSST’s successful community organising work to advocate for residents’ rights against an unjust policy initiated by the authority. As this was a rare case of launching a comprehensive community organising approach in the sector, I conducted individual interviews with the two social workers who played a vital role in the incident. Special approval had been obtained from my thesis supervisor since my subordinates managed these two social workers. The two participants

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<sup>6</sup> The Chun Tin incident is about a case of one of the urban renewal social service teams. The team concerned failed to secure a service contract after a tendering exercise and had to hand over the service to their successor. The service users were disappointed by the result. They initiated a series of social actions against the funding body to keep the original social service team to serve them. The dilemma that the social service team encountered was that they needed to avoid having a conflict of interest by making use of residents’ support to alter the tendering result while they did not want to ignore residents’ felt needs to be supported in this difficult time.

were explained about the study and assured that I would only use my capacity as a researcher in the study process. This clarification and guarantee related to the interviewer's trustworthiness and were crucial to the quality of data collected. It was because if the participants disclosed their 'wrongdoing' to me, who would address this behaviour in my job capacity, the participants might dare not tell me honestly. Even though I would not take follow-up action, this kind of disclosure at least would affect my perception of the two participants. Eventually, the two participants were willing to join the study voluntarily after office hours because they agreed to the contribution of this research to the betterment of social work ethics in secondary settings in the future.

By interviewing the social workers involved in the Chun Tin Street incident, the successful factors of the organising work were found - a perfect combination of the qualities of social workers, the quality of residents, the agency's support, as well as the unjust policy that triggered residents' advocacy. In comparison with the first four interviews, where participants were ambivalent about employing the community work approach, I identified two working environments in CWSS: enabling and disabling environments. The former refers to the Chun Tin Street work, whereas the latter refers to the first four cases. In the Chun Tin incident, factors that boosted community organising were encapsulated and described by the two responsible workers as a perfect combination of employing a community work approach.

It is reasonable that an enabling environment could facilitate using the community work approach; my puzzle until this stage was what was going on when social workers were striving to do community work under disabling environments. In answer to this question, it was helpful to understand factors that affected social workers' determination to employ the community work approach, regardless of the kind of environment in which they were working. This question prompted me to explore if any social workers could fit the second theoretical sampling in this research. Eventually, a committed and

experienced social worker who had worked in URSST operated by two separate agencies in which the atmosphere was not encouraging, was referred for interview. She was isolated by colleagues, misunderstood by residents, and pressed by her supervisor. Although she worked under pressure, she made every endeavour to actualise the mission of community work, which was to address the structural problems and empower residents to fight for justice. Interestingly, she did not care whether her practice was community work or not. Although she could act out, she only wanted to help residents overcome difficulties and settle down under the impact of urban regeneration. According to my experience in the field, this participant's performance was outstanding compared to most other practitioners. So, I recruited several participants who were working in a disabling environment and recognised the community approach to explore if there was any difference in their coping. Also, working in a disabling environment, it was found that the participants could only show a strong sense of helplessness with the working environment rather than consistently acting out the community approach.

#### **4.10 Theoretical saturation**

Grounded theory logic invokes saturation with two criteria: the researcher continues to sample and code data: 1) until no new categories can be identified, and 2) until new instances of variation for existing categories have ceased to emerge (Willig, 2013). In this research, the flow of theoretical sampling was mainly directed by a category about 'participants' ambivalence towards performing their professional identity', particularly in whether they could employ a community work approach in practice. Because of my familiarity with the field of study, I was aroused to further explore the phenomenon that community workers faced difficulties in employing a community work approach in CWSS. Various instances of variation for this critical category have emerged throughout the exploration process. Besides,

several categories repeatedly emerged in different stages of the research, namely: 'having trust issues among clients, social workers, and supervisors', 'experiencing negative emotions', 'being ambivalent in performing professional identity' and 'taking hidden actions in practice'. Altogether, these four categories emerged in most of the data collected from various participants, and their relationships in each case and among other cases were dynamic and complicated. The details of this analysis will be presented in Chapter 5.

In total, I conducted in-depth interviews with ten participants (N=10), and the data collection stopped after that. It is important to note that, however, theoretical saturation functions as a goal rather than a reality. It is because even though we may strive for saturation of our categories, modifying categories or changes in perspective is always possible (Willig, 2013). In fact, I understood that if I continued to sample after the tenth interview, there was a possibility that further new categories or cases of variation would be identified. However, I took into account the limited time and resources available in this postgraduate study, I decided to stop after the tenth interview. Another concern when using theoretical sampling was about the researcher's intention of not seeking generalizability but focusing on sampling adequacy since theoretical sampling aims to obtain data to explicate categories and define pivotal qualities of the studied experience. This logic supersedes the sample size, which may be very small (Charmaz, 2014). In fact, at the point of saturation in the tenth case in this study, the four aforementioned categories captured the bulk of the available data. Fortunately, with sufficient trust in the researcher, most participants could share their experiences, thoughts and feelings regarding this sensitive topic, contributing a set of data with good quality, which was beneficial to the building up of context-specific theory.

#### **4.11 Data analysis and coding**

In this study, one focus group and ten in-depth interviews in Cantonese, for the sake of linguistic comfort of both interviewees and the researcher, were conducted between June 2016 and August 2017. In total, 10 participants were interviewed. Each interview was around 1.5 hours. All these interviews were entirely audiotaped and transcribed in Chinese. The Chinese transcriptions were then fully translated into English for coding. Doing translation before coding has two considerations. This arrangement (translation of the full transcription before data analysis) could preserve details of the linguistic context and increase rigour in the research process, also avoiding errors and distortions of key messages (Abfalter, Mueller-Seeger, & Raich, 2021). Besides, ‘coding with gerund’, a method of GTM, was used to capture the process from data, and it could only be done in English. However, it is important when coding that the researcher has accessed to both the transcriptions in the original language and the translation in order to try to ensure some of the nuances of the conversations are not lost.

In GTM, coding, which is in stages, bridges data to the emerging theory by identifying and refining categories (Stern, 1980). This process took place progressively throughout this research, using initial, focused, and theoretical coding.

In initial coding, the researcher generated ideas from raw data closely using ‘line-by-line coding’. Since this study aimed to generate context-specific theory to explain the investigated social process, coding for actions mattered (Charmaz, 2014). Coding with gerund was used to capture processes and numerous initial codes that reflected processes were then identified. I used gerunds when doing coding because, as Charmaz (2014, p. 245) suggests, “it can prompt thinking about actions and fosters theoretical sensitivity because these words nudge us out of static topics and into enacted processes”.

In focused coding, I decided which initial codes could contribute most to the analysis. Hence, those codes that seemed central to participants’ direct

practice became focused codes (Sbaraini et al., 2011). Charmaz (2014, p. 19) thought, “Since categories designate the grouping together of instances with central characteristics, they are analytic rather than descriptive and at a high level of abstraction when grounded theory analysis progresses”.

One of the characteristics of the grounded theory method is that data collection and analysis are done simultaneously. Memo-writing throughout the study enables researchers to flag incomplete categories and gaps in their analysis. My memo-writing was mainly in diagrams and short notes, either in Chinese or English, to capture my reflection on the data collected.

In this study, I conducted three rounds of theoretical sampling; initial and focused coding was carried out repeatedly until saturation. Four categories were eventually identified in focused coding: ‘having trust issues among clients, social workers, and supervisors’, ‘experiencing negative emotions’, ‘being ambivalent in performing professional identity’ and ‘taking hidden actions in practice’. Among these four categories, ‘being ambivalent in performing professional identity’ and ‘taking hidden actions in practice’ were selected as core categories. They were selected because they could account for most of the variation in the studied pattern of behaviour (practitioners’ struggling in using community work), and most other sub-categories were related to them, in line with Glaser’s (1978) suggestions on reasons for core category selection.

Based on these categories, the research proceeded to the theoretical coding stage, which Glaser (1978) introduced as conceptualising how the substantive codes may relate to each other as a hypothesis to be integrated into a theory, serving to tell an analytic story with coherence (See Chapter 8 about theory integration).

One of the assumptions of grounded theory reflects the complexity and variability of phenomena that involve the most salient contextual factors that may influence human behaviour and thereby develop substantive theory



(Stern, 1980). The grounded theory method aims to include many variables and concepts connected to explain the basic social process. Those categories generated from data represent abstract phenomena and serve to connect the empirical and abstract phenomena at the theoretical level (Chenitz, 1986). Glaser supported Phyllis Stern's description of theoretical coding as "means applying a variety of analytic schemes to the data to enhance their abstraction" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 150). Practically, Chenitz (1986, p. 42) thought, "the Six C's identified by Glaser in 1978 should be utilized by the grounded theory researcher to reflect the complexity and variability of the phenomenon under study". From the perspective of Chenitz (1986, pp. 39-47), the definition of the 'Six C's' is as follows:

1. Causes: refers to the salient factors that generate the phenomenon.
2. Consequences: refer to the results or outcomes
3. Covariances: refers to the nature and extent of the relationship between the variables.
4. Contingencies: refer to the direction of variance.
5. Contexts: refers to the symbolic social world of the participants.
6. Conditions: refer to circumstances under which the phenomenon occurs.

Given my inexperience in conducting a grounded theory study and the complexity of the research area, the analysis in theoretical coding mainly took into account the Six C's coding family to make links between categories and establish relationships between them. I first used the Six C's to examine the two core categories one by one. These findings were then integrated and re-organised as the contextualised theory built up in this research. Finally, when I retained some strategies of GTM in this study, as mentioned in 4.4. of this chapter, I appreciated that the Six C's approach originates from Glaser and may seem incompatible with the constructivist approach of Charmaz.

However, the categories were a useful way of organising the analysis, and their use was not premised on a positivist methodology.

#### **4.12 Concluding remarks**

Each grounded theory study is unique. This chapter illustrates how I applied the grounded theory method in the selected area of investigation, including all technical areas of this research and my considerations as an insider researcher studying an area with which I was involved and familiar. These discussions on methodology are helpful for the upcoming chapters that present and analyse the data and develop the context-specific theory, which is an expected product of this research.

# Chapter 5 Setting the scene for analysis

## 5.1 Introduction

The grounded theory method aims to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of relevant behaviour that may be problematic for those involved and which occurs around the core category. According to the data collected in this study, ‘workers’ struggling to use the community work approach’ is seen as a pattern of problematic behaviour. Half of the participants in this study had direct experience of these struggles, while the rest noted that this problem was common in the studied secondary settings.

Four categories were generated from the data through initial and focused coding, in which categories and concepts were compared. These categories were ‘having trust issues among clients, social workers, and supervisors’, ‘experiencing negative emotions’, ‘being ambivalent in performing professional identity’, and ‘taking hidden actions in practice’.

Among the four categories, ‘being ambivalent in performing professional identity’ and ‘taking hidden actions in practice’ were selected as core categories. They were selected because they can account for most of the variation in the studied pattern of behaviour (practitioners’ struggling in using community work), and most other sub-categories are related to them, in line with Glaser’s (1978) suggestions on reasons for core category selection.

As mentioned in 4.11 of Chapter 4, Glaser’s Six C’s theoretical coding family (Glaser, 1978) will inform the analysis of the two core categories relating to ‘being ambivalent in performing professional identity’ and ‘taking hidden actions in practice’ in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively. Before that, this chapter presents the two sub-categories and data that can depict the overall context and atmosphere in the studied social service teams in community work secondary settings (CWSS).

## 5.2 Background information about participants and incidents

In this study, ten participants took part in the in-depth interviews. They mainly came from the Urban Renewal Social Service Team (URSST) and the Social Services Teams in the Buildings Department (BDSST).

During these interviews, participants were asked to share their experiences of handling dilemmas in practice (one to two incidents), giving their retrospective accounts. Although participants' perceptions of dilemmas varied, all incidents they selected can be understood as ethically difficult situations. There were fifteen incidents selected for analysis and discussion in this thesis. In the grounded theory method, these incidents were data collected in this study. A short description of these incidents and their links with participants are illustrated below (Table 3).

**Table 3: Description of incidents that involve participants**

Participant	Incident	Description
BD/1	A	A group of rooftop residents faced an eviction action taken by the enforcement department. The responsible worker mediated between residents and officers during the entire process and on the action date at the site. Simultaneously, residents were supported by community workers of a residents' alliance. The worker grasped the officers' action plan while understanding the residents' worries. He had to choose between 'being dishonest to officers by supporting residents against the eviction' and 'working with officers to achieve a smooth eviction'. Meanwhile, as a community worker, he blamed himself for not using a community work approach to support residents in their fight for a better resettlement arrangement. Instead, he could only co-operate with the alliance's community workers hiddenly to do advocacy work.
	B	An officer referred a resident to the worker and expected him to prevent the resident from making a complaint to the department. Besides, the resident's case was brought to court, and the worker needed to decide if he should admit his role. The worker knew he needed to respect the resident's right to express grievances. However, his act of supporting the resident in the complaints process was not revealed to the officer.
BD/2	C	A worker maintained a long worker-client relationship with an older man whose residence had broken building ordinances. The older man was agitated. He thought the problem was caused by the policy change. The worker's effort to persuade responsible officers

		to postpone the enforcement action was in vain. To avoid provoking the older resident's emotions that might impact his ill health, the worker removed an official notice issued by the department. The dilemma that the worker encountered was either to break the rules as a professional by removing the notice or let the resident be exposed to the potential crisis.
HS/3	D	A worker was assigned to handle a case involving an elderly person with mental illness who had not paid rent for a long time, when the organisation demanded that the resident surrendered his housing unit. The worker thought a public organisation should find a better alternative to avoid making the resident become homeless. Although she questioned this arrangement, she had to support the resident to solve the problem within a limited time.
UR/4	E	When assessing a resident's eligibility for applying for a public rental housing unit, the worker and his colleagues questioned the resident's alleged condition and queried the resident's honesty. This mistrust led the worker to consider not providing support to the resident for fear that he would support the resident in telling lies. Nevertheless, he worried that the resident would suffer if he made a wrong judgment. He was struggling with how to make the right decision.
	F	In helping a resident with a mental health problem, a worker's team was condemned by a local pressure group which thought the team did not fight for the resident's welfare with the redevelopment operator. However, the worker's team prioritised handling the resident's emotional problem rather than supporting the resident in bargaining with the project operator. The worker and her team even experienced cyberbullying by the group for this reason.
UR/5	G	Two workers [Participants 5 & 6/UR] had served a large group of residents for two years since the redevelopment project was announced. They built trust with residents after organising them to fight for a reasonable and fairer compensation package. Surprisingly, in the middle of the redevelopment project, the team lost their service contract in a re-tendering exercise, which meant they could not serve the residents. Residents were so upset that they initiated a series of social actions against the funding body. The workers were placed in an embarrassing situation. They were expected to avoid a conflict of interest while feeling uncomfortable if they were indifferent to the residents' needs.
UR/6	G	As above
	H	In urban redevelopment, affected shop operators were concerned with obtaining better compensation for reopening their businesses. Workers were typically involved in providing residents with

		guidance or advice on the money issues involved. Nevertheless, workers needed to intervene cleverly by not touching on the compensation amount.
UR/7	J	When assessing a tenant's whole family's eligibility for applying for public rental housing units, a worker queried the residents' alleged condition and their honesty. This mistrust made the worker consider not supporting the resident in applying for proof of address. He thought the public resources would be abused if the residents were dishonest. However, the worker's final decision was affected by the operator's inconsistency in handling cases, particularly in the final stage of the project.
UR/8	H	In urban redevelopment, affected shop operators were concerned with obtaining better compensation for reopening their businesses. Workers typically provided residents with guidance or advice on money issues. Nevertheless, workers needed to intervene cleverly by not touching on the compensation amount.
	L	When working with a pressure group that supported residents affected by urban redevelopment, the worker tried to earn the group's trust. Nevertheless, she felt uncomfortable about some of the group's social actions that would harm residents and stakeholders. The workers found there to be a fundamental values conflict between social work and the social movement.
	M	In working with colleagues who were former caseworkers, a worker felt disappointed about their orientation, which tended towards persuading residents to accept the operator's compensation package rather than enhancing residents' consciousness of the structural problem behind it and advocating for their benefit.
BD/9	N	A worker visited a referred group of residents living in sub-divided flats (illegal residences) in an industrial building. Upon approaching these residents, the worker discovered another group that had yet to be targeted by the department. As a result, she kept paying home visits to them but did not disclose this matter to her agency, in which she had no trust.
	P	Under a contracted-out mechanism, the social service team operators were concerned with continuously securing contracts. The worker experienced an episode when her supervisor used an official meeting to please officers. The worker felt ashamed of her supervisor's behaviour, and this incident also affected her trust in her supervisor.
BD/10	Q	A worker was due to pay a home visit to a resident with an officer. Upon the visit, the officer came with several colleagues. They were going to enter the resident's home for some inspections regarding an upcoming eviction. The worker was angry about this arrangement and had to decide whether to keep visiting the resident or reject the officers' surprise inspection shortly.

	R	The worker experienced her supervisor's self-limiting behaviour. The supervisor rejected team members' proposal to publish information to educate residents about their rights in building safety. The supervisor worried that this information would trigger residents to complain and create trouble for the department.
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### 5.3 Tangible pressure faced by practitioners in the work settings

As is characteristic of secondary settings, the core business of the studied social service teams is not social work. Working in this setting, workers experience pressured situations. Before presenting the two sub-categories, I will first lay out tangible and intangible pressures that workers commonly experience.

The sector has long commented on the workplace location of social service teams because it has implications for workers' professional autonomy. Offices of URSST were located within the redevelopment project and near the redevelopment operator's offices. On the other hand, BDSST did not have their own office; the workers' workplace was located in the department and shared space with the department's officers. Workers' pressure was directly related to the physical environment:

What was the difference between BDSST and URSST? Firstly, I think it was about the hardware. They were in two different physical settings. You [BDSST] were in the department's office, and [URSST] had your own office.....I think it was related to the autonomy; there was a different feeling because you [BDSST workers] were located inside the department.... you even got some stationery through the government....we worked in a shared office, which meant that we could not talk about everything in the office. It was difficult for residents to approach workers in the office where we had no independent space to meet them. We could only pay home visits to them [residents]. When residents visited us, they found we were in the same office. It was strange.

[Participant 9/BD]

The above worker [9/BD] thought social workers' every action, including telephone conversations with residents, could be listened. The pressure created by the physical environment implied a survival problem – generally workers thought there was a risk that their service contract would not be renewed if the team did something opposite to the department's interests. Hence, working in the same workplace meant workers were closely monitored.

A participant [1/BD] in incident A also described those pressured situations as real threats to social workers practising in secondary settings. He worried about whether his serving agency could successfully renew the next service contract, mainly if he and his colleagues did anything that officers did not welcome. This psychological threat prevented workers from freely interacting with residents. Discussions on cases and work strategies between workers and their colleagues were also constrained. Therefore, although it was an environmental factor, it directly affected service quality and workers' enactment of their professionalism. Service continuity was a concern of all agencies operating the social service teams under time limited contracts. This affected service development and workers' job security.

#### **5.4 Intangible pressure faced by practitioners in the work settings**

Practitioners' understandings of pressure varied depending on their perception of what was significant. In incident C, the participant [2/BD] was concerned that she lacked time and flexibility in handling cases referred by the Buildings Department (BD) officers. Under a co-working mechanism, cases were jointly handled by a social worker and a responsible officer. The social worker took care of human factors, whereas the officer focused on residents' possibility and timing of compliance with the building ordinances.

A similar example is found in incident D. A worker [3/HS] who was directly employed by the housing society to support residents living in public rental units



was requested to handle a mental health case on short notice, and was left with no room to explore enough alternatives to solve the resident's problem:

The officer told me about the resident's problem but did not mention his expectations of what I would solve for the resident. It was because the officer thought the intervention would be straightforward .... later, the officer informed me of the time the resident had to surrender his unit, which meant I only had a limited time to intervene. I thought he should notify me earlier, although he expected me to provide aftercare service. I guess he had made his decision before referring the case to me.

[Participant 3 /HS/Incident D]

It is important to understand that officers have their own goals and expectations when making referrals. They referred cases to social workers based on the existing work mechanism and procedure. However, the limited space for workers to assess intervention methods was not just a time-limited issue but also a professional autonomy issue. This constraint could be quite challenging for the workers, who often must accept it unwillingly. This situation did not contribute to the enactment of professionalism. The above cases inform us that social workers in this setting were often seen as tools of the funding bodies, lacking even the basic freedom to organize their interventions. This lack of freedom could be seen as an injustice in the system.

On the other hand, another SST in CWSS encountered its unique work pressure. The URSST was a unique service that only targets those affected persons living and operating businesses within the redevelopment area. Unlike other traditional social services that focus on clients' welfare needs, the URSST's focus on compensation was crucial. Most of the service users were concerned with the compensation they should receive from the operator. How to judge whether the compensation amount was reasonable was perceived by social workers as one kind of stressful situation they always faced:

This kind of dilemma would only be faced in an urban renewal context, that is, residents' request.... this dilemma was relatively big. For several dimensions, in shop owners' cases, in the beginning, shop owners who were clients hoped to continue their business after renewal. However, after a certain period of negotiation, clients found that this did not work. So, they changed to make a request for money. This started a series of problematic questions: the first was whether to request money, as some clients wanted to continue their business.... you know, another question was coming, that was, how much was enough...how to judge was the starting point of the dilemma.

[Participant 6/UR/Incident H]

As this participant [6/UR] mentioned, the dilemma started when clients requested to opt for monetary compensation. The situation would have been much more complex if this had occurred in a group of shop owners or operators who were running their businesses in the same area, maybe on a street or in a market. Since each had their own interests, there was an interrelation among various individuals bargaining with the operator. The social worker needed to help them communicate well in a group context, sometimes making use of their group dynamics to reach a reasonable position for further negotiation.

We usually solved it through meetings to set direction. This was quite controversial as they would object among themselves. Some clients suggested having around a million dollars...they would say 'no' to this until they reached an amount, say half a million, and they would discuss it in detail and try to fix it. They knew it was difficult, so they always requested to continue their business and have a place for their shop. Then, when the authority replied to them with the amount, this gave them a reference for further consideration. Clients would return three times the amount for negotiation.

[Participant 6/UR/Incident H]

When asked how to resolve this difficult situation, this participant shared that he only paid attention to identifying the justification that clients could make for the compensation amount, instead of how much should be enough:

This was a dilemma that was difficult for a social worker to judge. I would not judge if the amount was proper or not; instead, we guided them to find a justification for setting such an amount. What I could do was guide the client to anticipate the authority's response and what they think. If they accepted their proposed offer, I think we, social workers, could not stop them.

[Participant 6/UR/Incident H]

This experienced worker [6/UR/Incident H] had his way of tackling residents' consultation on money issues. Through his experience, he could differentiate those shop owners who had real needs and those who did not. He understood the complex urban renewal context and its differences from traditional social welfare settings where clients' vulnerability was apparent. Some people commented that residents affected by urban redevelopment owned shops and private residences and were not the most disadvantaged in society. However, this worker [6/UR] had his own view:

I think at the moment of renewal, those [clients] are still operating their business every day on the site, and their living depended on that business, so they could not lose their businesses or shops. They kept meeting with us about fighting for their welfare. However, the operator conducted the freezing survey upon announcement of the renewal project, which was the cut-off time for assessing clients' eligibility [those moved in after the freezing survey were ineligible]. At that time, there were many unoccupied shops; from the authority's view, they were not operating and thus not eligible, but the clients concerned had operated their business there for some years. Regarding these kinds of cases, we social workers had to make some value judgements.... I do not think it is a matter of being deserving

[clients deserving of help] or not, but any one of them needed such compensation to make a living.

Honestly speaking, some shop owners [did not deserve help] ... within the whole group.....because some shops had been idle for some time, that means shop owners had not run their business there. In this case, of course, we had our value judgment [that they did not deserve help].

[Participant 6/UR/Incident H]

Clients' vulnerability in the urban redevelopment context has long been questioned since affected residents were not seen as a vulnerable group in society. Judging if clients are vulnerable and deserve support is subjective and contested. Under current renewal policies, social workers unavoidably assessed clients' vulnerability when judging whether clients' requested compensation amounts were reasonable. However, some social workers like [4/UR] chose to avoid making this kind of judgment relating to compensation:

...we might, based on our working experience, try to avoid discussing anything relating to money with residents. We only handled those cases within the policy framework. We will do nothing for those cases beyond the framework or avoid it.

[Participant 4/UR/Incident E]

The worker [4/UR] found the prevailing policies unfair. Despite this, the worker chose to prioritize safety by handling issues or judgements only within the policy framework. In this case, avoidance was used as a coping mechanism for CWSS workers to manage intangible pressure.

However, not all workers avoided discussing the compensation amount with residents. One worker [8/UR] chose to be congruent by guiding and even challenging residents' suggested amounts based on her work experience and knowledge:

Yes, I remembered there was a difficult case, and it could not be settled eventually. The price he [the resident] set was so unrealistic that he could not even persuade me. I always invited him to persuade me. I would not hide my feelings; as a social worker, I needed to be genuine and congruent. I would use some ways to tell him that the price was unrealistic or even exaggerated. I would ask him his justification.

[Participant 8/UR/Incident H]

However, the worker [8/UR] was frustrated by the operator's inconsistency in offering compensation to residents. The operator's offer was sometimes out of her estimation and expectation. That means her rational discussion with residents might possibly cause them to suffer in obtaining less compensation. Consequently, she was confused when working in this service context.

Eventually, the operator surprisingly offered the residents the requested amount [which the worker] thought was unacceptable. It happened every time! Then we really could not judge. At that time, we always thought that was the maximum amount, but it turned out that the operator could make this offer....so I questioned myself whether I should cap the amount for the resident...I really could not estimate.

[Participant 8/UR/Incident H]

This worker [8/UR] was very frustrated in this assessment process and could not correctly position herself as a professional social worker. On the one hand, she understood that the operator was responsible for managing the public money; on the other hand, she did not deny that clients should fight for just and fair compensation as they were affected by the urban redevelopment. Unfortunately, she eventually quit her job in serving URSST as she could not position herself in this complex context. Unlike Participant 4, who avoided handling this type of case upon screening case referral, this worker was committed to helping the resident. However, eventually, she left the field owing to the problem of professional positioning. The two cases were different. The former case showed the worker's

avoidance, whereas the latter demonstrated the worker's critical choice of a suitable context where she could enact the professionalism she believed in:

Eventually, the resident tried to persuade me as he had a rooftop; [it] had its own value, but eventually in vain. That is why I quit my job then, as I could not identify my position. I could not make a judgement. On the one hand, the operator said they needed to save public money; on the other hand, clients told me they needed better compensation from their subjective viewpoint. I could not judge as some residents thought that they were greedy.

[Participant 8/UR/Incident H]

## **5.5 Trust issues among clients, social workers and supervisors**

In practice, one of the focused codes, 'having trust issues among clients, social workers and supervisors,' was found in some incidents. The 'not-trusting' behaviours emerged in the studied social service teams. This code was generated from the initial codes of several participants' interviews. It was chosen mainly because it is uncommon for mistrust among various stakeholders within one type of service setting, so it would provide some insights for the analysis.

### **5.5.1 Workers not trusting clients**

As helping professionals and change agents enhance clients' social functioning, social workers strongly emphasise building trusting relationships with clients because worker-client relationships, instead of authority, were perceived as a basis for facilitating clients' change. Generally speaking, the trust within the worker-client relationship is reciprocal, which means both worker and client want to have trust in each other. If workers can earn a client's trust, they will experience less resistance in the helping process, and the client will be more motivated to solve their problems. On the other hand, clients seeking help from workers hope to be trusted by those workers to solve their problems effectively. In

general, when serving people with vulnerabilities, workers seldom have reservations about clients' honesty. However, when the following social worker [4/UR] was practising in the URSST as a gatekeeper, he questioned why the client should be trusted:

In fact, facing this case, we felt a strong sense of struggle. Since we did not believe what the clients told us, we spent some time discussing this. It involved that we did not believe the clients who did not have full documents for assessment since clients alleged that the owner who rented the flat to them was their relative<sup>7</sup>.

[Participant 4/UR/Incident E]

During the urban renewal process, it was common for the operator's staff to seek social workers' verification of whether those affected tenants were eligible to apply for compassionate public rental housing or certain types of compensation or allowance. If the operator queried the tenants' eligibility, the responsible officer would refer the tenants to receive the URSST service for further assessment. Although this was a self-approached case, as a gatekeeper, this participant [4/UR] had an obvious query about the client's eligibility upon the first contact, and his colleagues (other social workers) even considered not providing any service to them:

The question followed [by workers' mistrust of the client] was about what we should do to help the clients under such a query. Some of my colleagues even suggested we should not render any service to them.

[Participant 4/UR/Incident E]

As a helping professional, it is difficult for the social worker to decide not to provide services to a client before making a thorough assessment. Apart from feeling

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<sup>7</sup> To be eligible for the compensation, residents need to prove how long they have lived in the unit and generally a proof from a landlord is necessary. In this case the worker was told that the landlord was the resident's relative and so no documents could be provided.

uncomfortable with this unusual consideration, this participant [4/UR] associated the struggle with a core social work value, namely 'value-free':

My colleague asked me once whether we should be 'value-free', particularly before rendering service to the resident, which means we accepted the resident in the first place. As a social worker who practises in such a complex situation, should we make a judgement on something before rendering service?

[Participant 4/UR/Incident E]

However, according to the above quotation, the participant [4/UR] referred more to a non-judgemental attitude rather than value-free. He was afraid of whether their decision to reject the clients was not mature enough in the initial helping process. This participant and his colleagues not only faced an ideological problem of being judgemental when assessing the client's situation but also associated workers' mistrust of clients with the level of help that social workers should offer in the helping process:

After conducting several interviews with clients, I grasped the whole picture, and I thought I would not put much effort into this case as I found something that did not make sense.

[Participant 4/UR/Incident E]

Furthermore, this participant [4/UR] worried that if social workers provided full support to the client, the operator would perceive social workers as creating trouble for the operator. When talking about whether he should make a strong effort in the case, the worker [4/UR] used a Cantonese colloquialism which implied that the operator would be unhappy if he tried his best to support a resident who lacked substantial proof of his application as the operator would interpret the URSST as producing difficulties for the operator. Notably, this was only the worker's subjective interpretation concluded by his experience, observation, and fellow workers' experience. This worry implied how the funding body's interests subtly impacted workers' decision-making. When workers made professional



judgements, they had to consider the operator's perception for fear that their working relationship with the operator would be affected:

I guess we were arguing about our input ... If I paid total effort, I did something more than my duty [a Cantonese colloquialism that meant being opposed to the operator]. For example, I worked with the resident to further check or search. However, I only provided an essential service to the resident and let the resident follow up with the operator. One of my colleagues said if so, I could be a tool; purely, I was a tool – if you [the resident] sought help from me for a specific matter, I would help you [the resident]. Still, I would not provide you [the resident] with any additional service. I guess this [decision to make a full effort or offer an essential service] was an apparent controversy.

[Participant 4/UR/Incident E]

When making a professional judgement, it could be argued that this worker [4/UR] took too much of the funder's perspective into account in ways that would side-track the worker's original decision. Such consideration was unnecessary in this incident because workers could help the resident obtain relevant documents through normal channels. Therefore, the final decision on the resident's application should be evidence-based. In contrast, the worker [4/UR] instead worried that his effort to help the resident would make the funding body unhappy, implying that workers anticipated that the funding body did not want to grant resources to the resident. On the other hand, the worker [4/UR] needed to use his professional autonomy properly, but he gave it up. Furthermore, if the worker [4/UR] does not support the resident fully, this is an act of self-limitation to please the funding body or prevent the worker from making a mistake. In fact, if the worker [4/UR] had no trust in the resident, he could make an assessment based on evidence and tell the resident the result. However, he felt difficulty making a substantial judgement because of the indeterminacy of the case. He also questioned his role in making the judgement:

The second question is about the judgement: Am I in a suitable position to make the judgement? Or should I let the resident go to a person with a higher authority, for example, a judge, [if] it is none of my business?

[Participant 4/UR/Incident E]

Besides, he [4/UR] worried about whether he supported residents to commit a wrong act while being afraid residents would be harmed if he did not help them:

Then, I queried whether I helped clients do something wrong. However, after debating with my colleagues, I became quite confused. I think at the beginning, I did not believe the clients and intended to reject them. I was afraid I supported clients in doing something wrong. If our assumption about the clients was correct, that meant they told lies, and I helped them fight for welfare, which would be morally wrong.

[Participant 4/UR/Incident E]

In incident E, the worker's [4/UR] mistrust targeted a self-approached resident. The mistrust manifested in a series of questions the worker [4/UR] and his colleagues asked, including whether they should provide assistance if the resident told lies and the rationale for helping the resident if they decided to do so. The worker's [4/UR] role in making a professional judgement in this incident was also questioned, coupled with what intervention he could make if the resident were a liar. In addition, he even asked himself if he could be non-judgmental in handling this case. The case lasted two years, and the worker [4/UR] struggled during the first half year. The worker [4/UR] and his colleagues eventually compromised by trying their best to help the resident, regardless of whether the resident would be granted public resources in the end, for the following reasons:

Where is our power? We mainly discussed: did we [social workers] have a specific power [to stop serving residents?] ..... we hoped every resident, our service users, could be pretty served by us. We should not reject residents' service at this moment, which was one of our significant discussions.... another point was also related to the resident's interest; if the resident's

allegation were true, but we did not help them, the resident would suffer. In fact, the resident had the right to fight for his interest....

[Participant 4/UR/Incident E]

A similar situation and the worker's reaction regarding the worker's mistrust of the client occurred in incident J, in which the worker [7/UR] also queried whether the residents had provided information that was accurate. Similarly, this worker's initial response was to identify the primary and minimum work he could help the residents because of his mistrust:

I have been doubtful of the whole picture of this case during the helping process. Too many details were hidden. I asked myself how much I should disclose [information] to the client. What should be disclosed and what should not be to the client. The client would ask me many things. On the other hand, I could not believe the client was living in the flat according to the information at hand. First, how could I find proof of address for the client? Different households involved in this case requested to have their individual public housing unit, which made me ask if public resources were allocated in such a way. I continued to ask myself at that time.

[Participant 7/UR/Incident J]

However, this worker [7/UR] did not bear the responsibility for the residents' abusive use of public resources:

I was struggling after reading all the information about the case. Did the client really live in the flat? The client could not get proof of address if the client did not. My role was to tell the client channels of applying for an address proof. Eventually, I decided to advise the client. After all, this is my responsibility, the task we [SST social workers] should do. If the client wants to abuse the mechanism, this is the client's choice.

[Participant 7/UR/Incident J]

Ironically, when asked if the worker considered disclosing his doubt about the residents' case to the operator, he did not. It was because he thought that, by experience, the redevelopment operator might relax its requirements at the final stage of the project. That is to say, although the worker was worried about residents' abuse of public resources, he discovered that it would be 'allowed' at a specific stage of the project since the operator wanted to clear the redevelopment site. This inconsistency in policy implementation brought workers, as gatekeepers, problems in assessing residents' eligibility in the setting:

No. I did not. This is because, based on past experiences, if the operator refers a case to URSST at the final stage of the redevelopment, the operator would like to settle the case. I heard from some senior colleagues that the operator would approve some cases even [if] clients concerned were not eligible at the final stage of redevelopment only because the operator wants to end the project. The operator would relax the requirements. ....Back in this case, when I communicated with officers, I could sense they did not trust the client either. Yet, as this is the last case in the project, they would handle the case in a less demanding manner. I only played my role to the basics.

[Participant 7/UR/Incident J]

URSST workers' mistrust of clients was closely related to urban redevelopment's unique financial benefit structure. This often diverted attention from the vulnerabilities of those affected by the redevelopment, posing a significant challenge for social workers who had to navigate this complex situation. The redevelopment operator, with their role in creating a confusing context through inconsistent criteria for granting allowances and compensation at different stages, further complicated matters and could lead to some residents' abuse of the system.

### **5.5.2 Workers not trusting colleagues and supervisors**

When funding bodies' interests and those of residents were conflictual, social workers situated between the two parties faced difficulties. The supervisor's support to social workers in this situation was essential. However, the collected data illustrated that workers did not trust supervisors owing to the latter's performance in relation to funding bodies. In turn, this mistrust impacted workers' ethical decision-making. In incident P, the participant [9/BD] dared not report to her agency that she identified some residents out of the service scope required by the service contract. She believed her agency would report these residents to the department, and eventually, the department would replace their homes. She did not report these residents because she thought that the welfare of her clients would be sacrificed by her agency, which intended to cooperate with the department. She shared the following example about her supervisor's behaviour in seeking to please officers:

Quite funny, we had regular meetings with the department's officers, yet we only spent 15 minutes on official matters over a two-hour meeting; the rest of the time was just casual conversation, no, for example, 'How about your children?', 'How about your show?', that is not related to work. At that time, my supervisor also presented in those meetings. He might feel wrong about my attitude during those meetings. He thought I should be more relating to them.... he thought I should be more involved in that kind of conversation.

[Participant 9/BD/Incident P]

The above participant [9/BD] did not trust her colleagues and supervisor. Her judgement was supported by her colleagues' clear and straightforward answer about their inclination to report a group of residents living in sub-divided units to officers. Meanwhile, she felt ashamed of her supervisor's behaviour when he was pleasing officers in a working-level meeting, which led her to believe residents' interests would probably be sacrificed if it was reported to her supervisor. As teammates, her colleagues and supervisor should have upheld the same professional values and sensitivity as the worker. Unfortunately, in this case, they

did not. The worker's mistrust of her colleagues and supervisor is an alarm for the profession regarding safeguarding professional standards under unbalanced power relations and how the supervisor demonstrated a role model to practitioners.

In another BDSST, a worker [10/BD] had a similar trusting issue to her supervisor:

I really think my social work supervisor is a bit of a conservative person...that is, as her subordinate, I think she tried not to have an opposite position to the department [funding body]. Therefore, when you [worker in general] read your big boss's mind, you [worker in general] sometimes may avoid telling her everything unless you [worker in general] feel there is a real need...Otherwise, I will solve it on my own.

[Participant 10/BD]

Unlike the worker [9/BD] who paid home visits to residents not referred by the department, this worker [10/BD] tended to minimise her communication regarding reporting work-relating matters to her supervisor since she labelled her supervisor as a conservative person who emphasised maintaining a good relationship with the funding body:

I didn't know what my social work supervisor thought; maybe the department was a funding body. That is, the department was an employer. But I was not sure whether our agency culture caused it; I really thought we were a bit.... that was why I concluded that my supervisor was a conservative person owing to some experiences that we were not allowed to do some types of service. For example, our service contract required us to publish something. I found some operators [other social service teams] liked us; they targeted residents as their readers educated their rights, and provided helpful knowledge about preventing them from breaking the law. But our target was the officers of the department! Then I felt strange, and I asked why and gradually I understood.

[Participant 10/BD/Incident R]

Based on her real experience with selecting the newsletter target, the worker [10/BD] was aware of her supervisor's strict sense in interpreting the service contract for the sake of the team's securing its future contract. Her supervisor was unwilling to expand the target from officers to benefit residents. Therefore, from this experience, the worker [10/BD] inferred that the possibility of her team adopting a community work approach was impossible, not to mention any other community organising work:

Maybe you [the team] can tell residents their rights, as would be the case with a traditional community work approach, let alone doing social action. She [the supervisor] even worried about doing resident education; she really thought the service contract only required us to educate officers. This was her standpoint. ....I did not talk to her on this matter. Yet, as her subordinates who understood her orientation, we [the worker and her colleagues] did not do any empowerment work, which means some organising work.

[Participant 10/BD/Incident R]

The frontline social workers and their supervisors should be part of a team that shares and upholds similar core values. This expectation is significant in a service context where professional autonomy is hard to maintain. The supervisor's attitude is pivotal and the key to backing up workers' performance in implementing their professional duties. However, the above incidents illustrated how workers' lack of trust in their supervisors blocked their mutual communication and support within the profession. This situation would not benefit clients as workers could not obtain the professional advice they should have. Worse still, the mistrust between workers and their supervisors could even lead workers to privatise their practice experience, particularly those ethical challenges (see Chapter 7); it, in turn, affected workers' psychological well-being in the workplace.

### **5.5.3 Workers not trusted by residents of the concerned group**

In the urban renewal context, workers of URSST were unlikely to be trusted by residents and concerned groups. However, the following worker [8/UR] demonstrated how she tackled this situation and gradually built up a trusting working relationship with residents.

Urban redevelopment is part of Hong Kong's societal agenda. In civil society, pressure groups, concerned groups, or residents' alliances were common platforms for social activists to support affected residents in fighting for their rights against operators. Therefore, members of these groups became key stakeholders that URSST social workers needed to work with. In the community that this participant [8/UR] served, social workers backed up the local concerned group to launch organising work. Since most advocacy strategies were formulated under residents' and social activists' leadership, social workers were advisors since they had grasped the operator's way of thinking. Noteworthy, the operator did not know about social workers' support to the concerned group. To build up a working relationship with concerned group members, social workers needed to attend their meetings. However, social worker's intentions when joining the concerned group meetings and their loyalty to residents were always questioned:

I could not remember if the concerned group invited us [social workers]; probably we were, but members of the concerned group did not know the reasons why we joined. At that time, the SST social workers were in a sensitive position. As residents knew, our money had come from the operator. In Chinese culture, people think you must serve your boss. It was normal. So, residents could not understand why social workers were going to help residents. I remembered I needed to explain to them again and again. They still did not understand why we were attending their meetings. They usually queried if we would collect their views and report them to the operator. I remember one of the organisers said social workers who attended their meetings did nothing but make residents worry.

[Participant 8/UR/Incident L]



They [concerned group members] asked if we had any views during meetings, and I remembered we gave views. Then, we gradually gave views when they discussed the strategy of action. Then they sensed that social workers had their functions in joining their meetings. Finally, we became members of the concerned group, and they called us whenever they had meetings.

[Participant 8/UR/Incident L]

Residents' mistrust of social workers, as shown in the above example, was mainly caused by the power relations derived from the funding mechanism. The worker had to make continuous effort and gradually earn the trust of the concerned group. In some situations, the mistrust was caused by the worker's self-protection in relating to clients throughout the helping process. The following example shared by the participant [8/UR] illustrated how a social worker helped residents write an appeal letter to the operator. This triggered a resident's bad feelings because the social worker avoided providing guidance and did not add to the letter to strengthen its persuasiveness:

We needed to submit letters before the deadline; otherwise, residents would lose their compensation. I remembered I had helped some shop owners to write their letters. One of them told me honestly that he did not trust me, but he just made a trial as I was referred by the residents' leader. I remember there was a turning point in one case. I asked residents why they did not request social workers to write a letter for them. They said some social workers told them that they would write exactly what residents told them word by word, without any editing. Also, the residents' leader could not accept this kind of letter because she thought the letter's structure was very poor.

[Participant 8/UR]

Since the nature of that letter was to persuade the operator to accept the resident's requests, in common practice, the social worker guided residents to assess the

situation, explore possible alternatives and consolidate their requests in an organised manner. The reason for the social worker's self-protective behaviour in this instance was that, under the secondary settings, the social worker concerned dared not to do anything against the operator's interest since the claim between the operator and the resident was conflictual. What this participant demonstrated was being genuine and committed to the process for the sake of the resident's welfare, which eventually earned the resident's trust. This was a new experience for this resident:

However, my method of writing a letter was that, as I knew the objective of that letter was to enhance the operator's understanding of residents' situation and requests, I first understood their background and their requests; then, I discussed with them how to strengthen their justification. I asked residents questions back and forth to clarify their explanations. I remembered one shop owner's case, and I asked him the reasons for non-removal, the causes of having such a big shop, and any characteristics of his business. Then I helped him to write a long letter of good quality. I knew then that residents started believing social workers could help them.

[Participant 8/UR]

The main reason for residents' mistrust of URSST workers was the contracted-out funding mechanism, which meant the redevelopment operator directly employed the teams. The concerned group, which gathered residents together, thus centralised this mistrust. However, workers can build trust with residents only if they behave in a way that a professional social worker should, even in an unfavourable environment, as the worker [8/UR] did in the above incident.

## **5.6 Experiencing negative emotions**

In practitioners' accounts of how they encountered ethical problems in practice, 'experiencing negative emotions' is another salient code identified in initial coding. These negative emotions include fear, toughness, uncomfortable, loneliness, and

anger. According to the collected data, there are three sources of workers' negative emotions:

1. Ethically difficult situations
2. Workers' relationships with their colleagues
3. Value conflict between social work and social action

### **5.6.1 Relating to ethically difficult situations**

In incident E, the worker [4/UR] was afraid of being a gatekeeper who shouldered heavy duties to assess residents' eligibility for receiving a specific allowance and housing benefit:

Sometimes, you are afraid of exercising your power in making a professional judgement. Until today, I have queried whether I am in a suitable position to make such a judgement, which eventually I may choose to avoid. I think the operator, not me, is in the proper position to confirm residents' eligibility to have a public house unit or receive a specific allowance. Should I let residents pass to the operator instead of me for the said assessment?

[Participant 4/UR/Incident E]

The above participant [4/UR] feared that he had to do something outside the service scope. He also felt a strong sense of helplessness in making judgments, especially those relating to money issues. At the same time, in handling a complex case, he feared making mistakes by assisting the resident in telling lies. He struggled with the case as none of his colleagues trusted the clients. Although the above incident triggered a negative emotion, it was embedded in the worker's daily practice as he always needed to make such a complex judgment. He thought assessing cases with high indeterminacy was not the responsibility of URSST workers.

Another participant's negative emotions targeted a specific person; in this incident Q, a worker [10/BD] was angry with an officer who used her trust to conduct a

surprise home visit to a resident, which was a pre-inspection for an upcoming eviction. Her anger was understandable because this surprise visit risked sacrificing her worker-client relationship. In addition, it was disrespectful behaviour. It also reflected a phenomenon that in the secondary settings, officers were keen on reaching their organisational goals without taking their co-workers' professional roles and their relationships with residents into account:

I was most angry that the senior officer disrespected me literally, and I felt like I was being taken advantage of—he joined the home visit that I initiated with several officers without informing me beforehand. In fact, I had asked his subordinate, but he did not answer me. So, they [the senior officer and his subordinate] were telling lies to me.

[Participant 10/BD/Incident Q]

On the other hand, in incident G, the two workers [5&6/UR] had to choose between supporting residents and avoiding a conflict of interest. There appeared a couple of positive emotions, motivation and gratitude, mixed with those negative ones, frustration and anger. The workers [5&6/UR] trusted each other and built a deep relationship with residents; they had undergone the same challenge and experienced similar negative emotions. They were deeply moved by residents' self-initiated actions and could not ignore residents' feelings. Furthermore, they had no solid reasons for their service contract not being renewed, and they could not be indifferent to residents' felt need for the team's continuous support to fight for their benefits.

Conversely, in another incident [C], the worker [2/BD] had intense regret when reviewing the case. She concluded that she could not prevent her client from moving from his residence in his old age. On the other hand, she felt enormously guilty because she was not good enough to handle this case even though she had sacrificed her professional integrity by using an unusual approach throughout the intervention.

Finally, in incident A, upon engaging in the eviction, the worker [1/BD] blamed himself for not being sensitive enough to advocate for residents. What he could do under constraint was to work closely with community workers of the residents' alliance while lobbying with officers. During this process, he felt more guilty and inferior; additionally, he could not perform community work as the residents alliance workers did. Finally, he is even ashamed for not behaving professionally when mirroring his placating style with officers.

### **5.6.2 Relating to colleagues**

In a small team like the two studied social service teams, team members' mutual support is critical to individual practitioners' psychological well-being. In incident M, the worker's [8/UR] arousal of bad emotions was found in relating to her colleagues who held work values that were different from hers. They were all former caseworkers who did not perceive problems from a structural perspective. This participant [8/UR] had to work alone in relating to the concerned group, which was very demanding regarding how the worker could back up residents and support them in everyday practice. She could not share her emotional ups and downs with colleagues since some of her work was hidden:

In fact, at that time, I felt exhausted from the team. Among five colleagues, the team leader did not know community work. He did not understand what was going on, so I ignored him. Another two colleagues were previously caseworkers who were innocent of organising work and community work..... People from the casework setting thought urban renewal policies could not be changed, which affected their explanation to residents. ....Those caseworkers thought the overall compensation package offered by the operator was very good since the operator used public money. Such reasoning is the same as that of the operator. Since they [ex-caseworkers] accepted this explanation, they spoke to residents this way. So, I think apart from being aware of the funding source, workers'

values matter. It is what I mentioned before how agencies position the social service teams can influence their recruitment selection.

[Participant 8/UR/Incident M]

I was emotionally unstable....I wanted to quit my job. I felt I liked a spy because all concerned group members only trusted me. The group could not build a relationship with my colleagues, who taught residents to accept the operator's offer. Between the group and my colleagues, I was so poor and uncomfortable. I felt like a spy whenever I was in the office with my colleagues. On the other hand, my colleagues were hostile to the concerned group. They thought the group's requests were unreasonable. The group always believed we [SST] were wrong. At that time, I could not position myself properly.

[Participant 8/UR/Incident M]

The above participant's [8/UR] experience was similar to the one [9/UR] in incident P. The worker [9/BD] felt lonely and fearful in relating to her colleagues. Her colleagues also did something in conflict with her work values. They perceived themselves as department staff, and they would report all things to officers, following their supervisor's style and maintaining a good relationship with the funding body:

The feeling was.... actually, it was pretty lonely, as I thought I almost had no support in such a small team where my colleagues did not support me. For example, I had to pay a home visit to an industrial building in the evening. I was really scared. Usually, you would ask a colleague to go with you. I did not trust my colleague when I wanted to do something....a bit scary. So lonely.... on the one hand, I was lonely and was afraid that I was doing something that my agency did not know about...if one day my agency was dissatisfied with my performance or if I was not alright....no one would support me!

[Participant 9/BD/Incident N]

When asked if she tried to channel her thoughts to her colleagues, this participant said:

At the beginning, I expressed a bit [about visiting a group of residents out of the service scope], but I felt a sense of drawing back.....Did I scare them? It was very difficult. I could not continue speaking to them because I....if I expressed too much about what I was going to do, eventually I could not do it, so I decided not to tell them. I had to do it my way.

[Participant 9/BD/Incident N]

Workers' negative emotions in incidents N and M also connected with their not having the trust of their colleagues. The two participants [8/UR and 9/BD] also did something in a hidden manner (paid home visits to a group of residents out of service group [9/BD] and supported the concerned group [8/UR]). They were the team's minority and had to be cautious to keep their secrets and protect clients' welfare.

### **5.6.3 Value conflicts between social work and social action**

Unlike traditional social services in the social welfare context, URSST was situated in a complex socio-political context where urban redevelopment was a concern for people in civil society. Campaigners actively influenced and supported affected residents by participating in local concerned groups.

Conflict would occur if a resident were simultaneously under the care of the concerned group and URSST. An apparent difference between social work and social action manifested in their core values. One of the values revealed in the following incident L was that campaigners adopted a radical approach to achieving their objectives. Sometimes, residents were pushed to commit actions that conflicted with their interests. This participant [8/UR] had worked with a resident who decided to fight for an ultimate victory against the operator by giving up considerable compensation. The participant [8/UR] made a massive effort to guide the resident to make a decision, but this was in vain:

I remember that I spent many evening sessions of meetings discussing the resident's choice because he was indecisive. Finally, he could not make up his mind until the deadline. His case was then brought to court. Eventually, he did not even collect the statutory compensation. Actually, he could manage any time, but he seemed not to take it. This was his preferred ending.

[Participant 8/UR/Incident L]

The worker believed resident's self-determination was important, although it was not easy for workers to encounter when campaigners' concerns differed from individual residents' interests:

It was because the concerned group operated from a social action perspective. Since the concerned group identified the injustice of the urban renewal policy, the group wanted to unveil it. In fact, however, I did not see things from that perspective. I did want residents to settle down. Therefore, finally, some residents put their cases to court because there was a difference between social work and social action. Now I am still standing on the social worker's side. The social action focused on turning over the system, which needed inevitable sacrifice.... if residents had to sacrifice, I want them to be able to determine this by themselves.....

[Participant 8/UR/Incident L]

On the other hand, workers' [8/UR] negative emotions were triggered by the campaigner's radical actions that were opposite to social worker's values in relating to people:

Since social action always differentiated clearly between enemies and us. Frankly speaking, I disliked such differentiation. My inner self was uncomfortable. Rationally, I understood that we needed such differentiation, but I always felt uncomfortable....I remember there once was a social action that made me feel bad. It was raised by the concerned group. Since two senior officers refused to meet us, residents suggested



sticking posters to 'arrest' them. These posters showed officers' photos were widely attached in the local community.

[Participant 8 /UR/Incident L]

This worker [8 /UR] demonstrated her ability to engage the concerned group to build a trusting relationship with residents, although she still experienced negative emotions. However, not all workers could engage the concerned group. In some situations, the social service team was the target of the group's attack. In incident F, the team was helping a resident with a mental health problem. A concerned group condemned the team for not fighting with the redevelopment operator for the residents' welfare. However, the work plan of the worker's [4/UR] team was first to handle the resident's emotional problem rather than supporting the resident in bargaining with the operator. The worker [4/UR] and her team even experienced cyberbullying by the group owing to this matter. When asked about his thoughts and feelings about this incident, the worker [4/UR] and his colleagues believed they made the proper judgement. However, this time, the worker's autonomy was threatened by the concerned group, not the funding body. The worker [4/UR] and his colleagues also sensed that their worker-client relationship was adversely affected by this incident.

After this experience, the team even chose to avoid working with the concerned group, and did not duplicate what the group was doing in assisting residents:

I guess our team considered that... if some people had already been doing something [that overlapped with the team's work at hand], we would concentrate on other areas that other people did not participate in. It may be our work pattern developed recently because of the current working conditions. And we definitely would not participate in what the concerned group is doing.

[Participant 4/UR/Incident F]

Regarding the two workers [4 & 8/UR], the pressure and negative emotions they faced fundamentally involved the values conflict between social work and social

action. There was no evidence that such conflict related to the relationship between workers and concerned group members. Members of the concerned group would not alter their principles even if they had a good relationship with social workers. In contrast, workers' coping attitudes differed—one participant [4/UR], in a less proactive approach, was avoidant, whereas another participant [8/UR] addressed the issue honestly.

## **5.7 Interprofessional collaboration under a contracted-out mechanism**

To summarise, in the discussion of the preceding sections of this chapter, we can see residents' lack of trust in workers was deeply rooted in the funding mechanism. Despite the need for trust among practitioners, their colleagues, and supervisors, the pressure to cooperate with the funding bodies often overshadowed this. The unique dynamics of the setting's complex socio-political context further eroded trust, with workers also mistrusting residents. The ethical challenges that emerged directly resulted from this context, triggering negative emotions among workers.

This chapter depicts the context and overall atmosphere of the studied social service teams. In the Six Cs theoretical coding family, the meaning of 'context' is about the character, atmosphere, and the participants' symbolic social world (Chenitz, 1986; Glaser, 1978). By presenting relevant data regarding the overall atmosphere of the pressure that practitioners faced in the setting, we have identified some objective and subjective elements that participants pinpointed to the two social service teams, which enhanced our understanding of the key feature of the service context of the social service teams. In addition, on top of the funding mechanism that governed these teams, professional collaboration was another key contextual feature worth noting.

The interprofessional collaboration within the two social service teams was governed by a service contract between the funding bodies and the social service organisations. The dominant professionals who worked closely with social workers

had a dual role. In day-to-day practice, the former were other professionals who handled cases jointly with social workers; however, at the contractual level, these dominant professionals served as representatives of the funding bodies, undertaking a duty of monitoring social service teams' performance.

In the UK, inter-professional collaboration has increasingly attracted attention in health and social care due to clients' complex needs and the division of labour that enforces collaboration between various professionals (Pullen-Sansfaçon & Ward, 2012). In the studied community work secondary settings, increasing numbers of government departments and public organisations engaged the social work profession in their systems to facilitate the attainment of organisational goals.

One of the classifications of organisations that engage in inter-professional collaboration is located in 'specialised subsystems dominated by other professionals' in which the non-social work profession manages social workers (Emprechtinger & Voll, 2017). The social service teams studied are in this category. Accordingly, the dominant professions could frame professional actions and produce certain constraints and leeway for other professionals to exercise discretion and preserve professional autonomy (Sosin, 2010). Abbott (1988) describes social workers who practised in these specialised subsystems as being left in a position of 'professional heteronomy'. This situation is elaborated by Emprechtinger and Voll (2017) as where social workers are supervised by somebody who applied another professional standard.

The dominant professionals in BDSST are surveyors and structural engineers, whereas in URSST, these dominant professionals are property management personnel and officers handling acquisitions. These professionals must abide by their organisational goals, such as ensuring residents' compliance with building ordinances and facilitating a smooth urban redevelopment process. In achieving these goals, there is a possibility that social workers are situated in ethically difficult situations where sometimes the interests of the funders and residents conflict, while these dominant professionals adhere to their particular professional standards.

In the studied teams, although social workers were supervised by managers who were registered social workers in their organisations, different degrees of control and monitoring by other professionals still existed. For example, in BDSST, social workers worked independently in principle but were accountable to the department on case progress. Cases officers referred to social workers were termed assignments. Some officers would give strong views on whether social workers should terminate these assignments, particularly those relating to residents whose welfare needs were fulfilled but could not comply with the building ordinance. In URSST, there was a similar situation. Since case management always involved whether residents felt satisfied with the authority's compensation, the officers would argue with social workers on their case handling and test residents' intentions, which challenged the confidentiality principle. The officers would also be concerned about political issues in the community of the urban redevelopment project.

In this context, although both social workers and building specialists are professionals seeking to serve residents, the funding mechanism did place the latter in a higher position than social workers because the contractual relationship framed the professional actions of social workers widely within their practice.

Furthermore, the continuing tendering exercises of these time-limited projects sustained the power relations and socialised the sector to accommodate to this mechanism. Workers were in a passive position and expected by the funding bodies to help achieve their organisational goals. They and their employing organisations were inclined to maintain a harmonious relationship with the funding bodies in order to secure their future contract. Their professional autonomy was subtly interrupted by the funding organisations.

At the individual level, social workers who joined the social service team might be aware of such a power struggle and strove for their autonomy. However, it all depended on the readiness of team members to respond to this situation. The CWSS has appeared in the local context for more than a decade, and obviously, the profession as a whole did not use the earlier period to seize their jurisdictions in

these settings, although professionals tend to proactively and reactively seize openings and act to reinforce or cast off their earlier jurisdictions (Webb, 2017a).

In addition, the context of a contracted-out mechanism contained certain political and ideological elements that affected the work values and norms. In the workplace of the two social service teams (a governmental department and a public organisation), these norms and work culture included following procedures and regulations, avoiding conflict, respecting hierarchy, and avoiding making significant changes in work practice.

Furthermore, social work practices are embodied in institutions, which MacIntyre (1984) indicates typically trade in the external goods of money, prestige, and their accompanying power relations as conceptions of the ends and goods involved. Funding bodies are striving to reach their organisational goals, which can be seen as external goods. In secondary settings like BDSST, its funding body understood that they were 'purchasing' social work services from NGOs. Their rationales for establishing the BDSST were stated clearly on their departmental website, and so were the objectives of the BDSST. The operating NGOs, the contractors, realised and accepted these objectives before taking part in the tendering exercise. In other words, those objectives reflected the department's organisational goals, that is, to speed up the clearing of thousands of deadlock orders relating to non-compliance with the building ordinances. While external goods are important for sustaining social practice, they also can seriously corrupt, distort, or disrupt the achievement of internal goods (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012b). When there appeared tensions between internal goods and external goods in all ethically difficult situations, workers had to negotiate internal goods for residents if they rejected a moral compromise to external goods.

## **5.8 Concluding remarks**

This chapter highlights the backdrop of the studied social service teams based in secondary settings. It can be seen that workers practised in a context with obvious

trust issues between workers, their colleagues, clients and the funding bodies. The clients' welfare in this setting involved housing needs and financial interests. When there was a conflict of interest between the funding bodies and residents, ethically difficult situations were generated since the funding bodies directly supported the social service teams were financially supported by the funding bodies. However, workers in a passive position, where they were expected to assist in achieving funding bodies' organisational goals, experienced a lot of negative emotions in addressing dilemmas and balancing diversified stakeholders' interests in the setting. These dynamics do set the scene for the following chapters, which explore issues of professional identity and the use of practical wisdom in handling ethically difficult situations in some depth.

# Chapter 6 Performing professional identity

## 6.1 Introduction

For social workers practising in community work secondary settings (CWSS), the issue of professional autonomy under the contracted-out mechanism is not just a theoretical concern but a practical one that directly impacts practitioners' work. This study, with its practical implications, is particularly relevant to practitioners in community work secondary settings (CWSS) as it explores how they can respond when their professional autonomy is perceived to be under threat, potentially improving their work conditions.

In this grounded theory research, the outcome is a generation of a context-specific theory about how social workers exercise their professional autonomy in CWSS. The grounded theory methodology (GTM) aims to include many variables and concepts connected to explain basic social processes; this approach involves generating categories from data to represent abstract phenomena and to connect the empirical and abstract phenomena at the theoretical level (Chenitz, 1986).

In addition, theoretical sampling was used in this study following the flow of participants' concerns and worries about employing a community work approach, which I believed was significantly related to practitioners' professional autonomy.

Eventually, the two core categories, namely ‘being ambivalent in performing professional identity’ (a state of uncertainty or conflicting feelings about one’s professional role) and ‘taking hidden actions in practice’ (engaging in actions that are not openly acknowledged or discussed), were generated to account for participants’ struggle in handling ethically difficult situations. In this chapter, I will present and analyse the data of the first category, which is developed by employing Glaser’s Six C’s theoretical coding family where relevant. This is a starting point for generating a context-specific theory to explain what was happening in the process. A similar analysis of the second core category titled ‘taking hidden actions in practice’ will be handled in Chapter 7.

## **6.2 Social workers’ discourses**

According to (Dent, 2017, p. 29), “professionals do produce and reproduce identity through discourse, narrative and representation, and it is a social process that will fully engage the individual social worker”.

Based on participants’ disclosures during the in-depth interviews, social workers practising in the two social service teams, namely the Social Service Team in the Buildings Department (BDSST) and the Urban Renewal Social Service Team (URSST), often had to engage with their professional identity under two common situations. First, the perception of their professional identity was reflected by how they made self-introductions to their clients (residents). Practising in secondary settings where social work was not a core business, and often in situations where the funding bodies and service users



(the residents) might have opposite interests, how workers introduced themselves to residents could impact service users' trust in them. Under the same constraint, secondly, workers' professional identity was associated with how much autonomy they had when they selected the community work approach as an intervention method. This was because this community work approach could be used to fight for residents' interests and welfare in ways that might be opposed to the interests of those funding bodies.

In these processes of engaging with professional identities, the participants of the social service teams went through two questions: 1) Were they staff members of the funding bodies? and 2) Were they community workers? In reality, community projects could not operate without a funding body's support. The studied social service teams were financially supported by the funding bodies, and the question was that if there were a conflict of interest between the residents and the funding bodies, it would be a difficult choice for workers whose interests they prioritise. This was because if workers perceived themselves as primarily the funding body's staff, they probably would follow the department's instructions, which meant they might not be able to put clients' interests first. Hence, these questions are contradicted, especially when workers were under circumstances where the two roles served to attain opposite goals on behalf of the residents and the funding organisations. As a result, on the one hand, the participants were struggling to present themselves either as staff members of the funding bodies or of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) they served. They were also frustrated when they could not perform community workers' duties well in practice. The

following section will illustrate these tensions by extracting related transcriptions from the interviews.

### **6.2.1 As a staff member of the funding bodies versus a social worker of NGOs**

In the BDSST group, participants' self-perceptions of their work identities varied. There was a group of social workers who preferred to introduce themselves to residents as staff members of the Buildings Department (department):

I usually told residents [clients] that I was one of the BD staff members.

[Participant 10/ BD]

This kind of interpretation was not rare in BDSST, being operated by various NGOs. One of the participants' [1/BD] thoughts of introducing themselves in this way involved social workers' practical considerations:

My colleagues introduced themselves as social workers from BD [without mentioning the identity of the NGO to which they belonged] to avoid trouble. It was difficult for us to explain to clients who we were.

[Participant 1/ BD]

The 'trouble' that the participant [1/BD] referred to is the contractual relationship between the worker's employer (NGO operates the social service team) and the funding body in situations where the funding bodies' interests may clash with the interests of the residents. In general, residents would mistrust workers, affecting the latter's further intervention with the residents.

As was stated above, the social worker's professional identity was reflected by their self-introduction to clients. Although it did not mean social workers' professional identity was equal to their work identity in terms of who they work for, how workers introduced themselves implied how they perceived and emphasised their professional identity. Owing to workers' professional backgrounds, the department engaged the social work profession in its system to assist in achieving its organisational goals. However, due to the conflict between department staff and social workers, the latter had to cover their professional identities to avoid the said 'trouble' and perform duties smoothly. That is to say, if workers were employed by the funding body without any conflict of interest with the residents, workers' problems in performing professional duties would not appear. In contrast, if there was a conflict and the workers could not perform these professional duties, this could, in turn, affect their professional identity because they could not perform what professional social workers should do.

These self-introductions were necessary at the beginning stage of a helping process when social workers approached residents upon receiving officers' case referrals. Social workers introduced themselves to clients as staff members of the department because they did not have the confidence to explain their complicated roles clearly and ensure that they would protect residents' rights and interests under the funding mechanism to avoid any negative impacts that might have on the residents' trust in them throughout the helping process.

A participant [1/BD] who perceived herself as a BD staff elaborated on her concern below:

What is my duty? When residents' emotions are disturbed by the BD order, I will help them. My understanding is simple; I have a more solid understanding after I have much experience. The department employs us; our identity is to implement what BD expects us to do.

[Participant 10/ BD]

To this participant [1/BD], the importance of being obedient in her workplace was paramount. Physically, a team of social workers were stationed in a shared office provided by the department, together with all levels of departmental officers, on top of her understanding of the service contract from a narrow and strict perspective. This worker [10/BD] clearly understood that she needed to receive instructions from officers. The assertion of "... to implement what BD [various level of officers] expected us to do" did place this practitioner in a position where clients' welfare or interest would be considered a lower priority. She noted this dilemma situation and addressed it by telling residents straightforwardly about her dual role:

I also wanted, actually, I understand that dilemma; I wanted things [the constraint produced by the funding mechanism] could be transparent; that is, I wanted residents to know I represented the department, and you [resident] could choose to what extent you would tell me. I told residents honestly about this. Since I was building rapport with them; I would tell them I might disclose some of their information to the

department/officers, so you [resident] should not tell me anything sensitive to the department. I wanted things that could be transparent.

[Participant 10/ BD]

The above social worker [10/BD] realised there was a conflict of interest between the residents and the department, a law enforcement body that urged residents to comply with building ordinances. The BDSST funding mechanism produced this tension—social workers were employed by the NGOs, which had a contractual relationship with the department to provide in-house social work services. Hence, these social workers played a dual role, being both social workers and representatives of the department in carrying out their duties.

Dent (2017) remarks that professionals have both a single identity and multiple identities available to them. This participant's challenge was related to her ability to accommodate various but contradicted discourses of social work and to become a professional who performs the right things she believes in the workplace (Dent, 2017).

After all, this participant [10/BD] did not avoid the role conflict but addressed it by allowing the clients to determine how they would relate to her after being informed of the role conflict and her way of handling it. However, the worker [10/BD] would possibly violate the principle of confidentiality as she told residents. In fact, the participant [10/BD] was not employed by the department; an accurate description was that the department appointed the NGO to which the worker belonged to operate the social service teams within

an agreed scope of services. This relationship was clearly bounded by the service contract. To respond to the role conflict, the participant only shifted her responsibility and risks to her clients, who needed to decide what information to disclose to her. The worker [10/BD] had overlooked the importance of trust in the worker-client relationship and residents' vulnerability in situations where residents might yearn for fuller support from a helping professional.

Basically, difficulties produced by workers' dual roles are understandable. However, if social workers introduced themselves as the BD staff, they still positioned themselves on the opposite side to clients because BD was an enforcing department. Ironically, social workers who hid their social worker's identity might thought they could avoid answering clients' questions about their loyalty, but they could not since the loyalty issue was unavoidable in this context, and the above participant did acknowledge this tension and described it as a dilemma.

Noteworthy, workers who perceived themselves as staff members of the department and thought they should perform duties expected by officers were certainly playing a subordinated role, in which the conditions of autonomy were limited. Practitioners work harder and are more conscientious in the interest of the company if they believe themselves to be acting professionally, rather than as subordinates (Fournier, 2002).

Another group of social workers who positioned themselves as employees of the NGOs they served grasped the essence of the contractual relationship between the department and their serving organisations. They realised that

NGOs had, in principle, the right to exercise professional autonomy. They were aware of the importance of performing social workers' roles independently.

For example, one participant [1/BD] in the BDSST group disagreed with identifying himself as a staff member of the department. Instead, he identified himself as a social worker who needed to influence officers in decisions relating to residents, and 'lobbying through support' was a strategy he employed:

I think we cannot build up this image [as a BD staff] or make people [clients] feel. Although it is not easy for us to explain our position, we need to remind ourselves we are not BD staff. The officers who work aside from you are your [workers'] lobbying target. We can use many ways of lobbying. Also, 'support' can be a way of lobbying. We need to remind ourselves of our position. [Our job] is tough and trouble. It is difficult for us to explain our role and identity.

[Participant 1/ BD]

Another participant [2/BD] understood that officers played a dual role in an in-house social service team as co-workers when they referred cases to social workers because they handled these cases together, while they were representatives of the funding body in which officers were responsible for monitoring workers' compliance to work procedures, understanding of ordinances, and outcomes of cases after social workers' interventions. This

participant hoped officers could respect her professional role, but she experienced emotional distress if officers could not do so:

You know, at the time when he [the building officer] took up a new post, and we were under his monitoring, we must say hello to him. I briefed him [my job] in our work area. I remembered I had quarrelled with him at his office. Please do not feel bad! I am a person who would quarrel with others. I remember I told him I would not do the job if you [the officer] did not refer the case to me. Working in BDSST was not my only choice. You [the officer] can tell my boss. I would resign. I am okay with my agency sending other people to replace me. But if you [the officer] assign a case to me, I have my professional judgment. However, if you [officer] do not allow us to handle it within a reasonable time frame, you [officer] can refer to any other person!

[Participant 2/ BD]

The above participant [2/BD] perceived herself as being in a profession providing human service, and she was responsible for influencing others' thoughts, including those she collaborated with. Besides, she knew her post was expected to mediate between the department and residents to resolve their conflicts. She remembered how she positioned herself when sharing a situation when officers did not allow her to handle a case with sufficient time:

I remembered there were some backlog cases which he [the officer] needed to speed up. He referred to us without giving us sufficient time to intervene. I remembered that at that time I was providing human



service, which we need to change one's thought. The department expected us to be a mediator who could handle conflicts harmoniously. However, the department could not give us sufficient time to do so. I argued with them for this reason. Eventually, they demolished and posted the notice.

[Participant 2/ BD]

### **6.2.2 As a community worker**

In these two social service teams, apart from the social worker's self-introductions to clients, their performing of professional identity was connected with their selection of social work interventions, particularly depending on whether they could employ a community work approach. Below is a participant's comment on his team that was only familiar with employing the casework method:

In general, we mainly employed a casework approach, which touched on residents' needs related to their living, compensation, and policies. Sometimes, we launched resident groups, and a small number of organising works related to politics, yet our organising work was weak. Besides, there were some programmes. After all, our team mainly used the casework approach.

[Participant 4/ UR]

Community development in Hong Kong is categorised as one of the social work methods; its position is equivalent to casework and group work. Most

local community workers believe that using the organising work of the community work approach can facilitate residents' participation and is beneficial to advocate for their rights. The above participant's [4/UR] sharing implied that his team was not good enough at performing community work as casework was the main deliverable of his team, and they were not sophisticated in delivering organising work. This appraisal was impacted by the traditional view of the local community work approach, and this was a negative sign that this worker's [4/UR] team could only employ casework.

Another participant [1/BD] practising in the BDSST held a similar orientation. He thought a community worker (his perceived professional identity) should employ organising work to advocate for clients' rights under unfair and oppressed situations; however, he failed to perform this role. What he had done was to resolve clients' immediate social and housing needs when responding to an upcoming eviction operated by the department. He did not even consider discussing an advocacy perspective with residents at the beginning of the helping process. He clearly illustrated his real difficulties in employing organising work and his emotional response to such limitations. Although he knew what a community worker should perform, he could not perform it consciously in practice:

As I spoke before, I thought the eviction [by the department] was necessary. I had a strong feeling about this [eviction]. During my first visit to the rooftop, my consideration was not about how to organise residents, or how to fight for whether the eviction was a reasonable action; it was because none of them [residents] was eligible to be

granted compassionate housing under prevailing resettlement policy which was very harsh; even though most of them have lived at the rooftop for three more years, or to question whether being settled in the temporarily housed centre was humanistic, etc. I did not discuss this with the residents about this.

[Participant 1/ BD]

In contrast, a seasoned participant [6/UR] in URSST had a different experience; he thought employing community organising was standard practice, and he was accustomed to informing his team members about this:

I joined the team six years ago. I did not think about this issue [could I employ a community work approach?]. I kept communicating with my colleagues in a team meeting that I would use the community work method, and always I was not told by anyone that I could not use this method. I learned organising work in social work training, and this was a usual practice, so I continued using it.

[Participant 6/ UR]

In the process of identity development, Cohen-Scali (2003) distinguishes between socialisation for work (through education) and socialisation by work (through work experience). The above worker [6/UR] experienced both and took doing community work for granted. He learned the community work approach in college, and its core values and impact on social change were socialised into him then. Since graduation, he has continuously practised his career by carefully choosing his serving units and agencies. All teams he had

served were of small size and fond of doing organising work. Hence, he could keep his momentum of continually using both perspectives and community work.

Another junior participant [5/UR] also had a clear identity of being a community worker because this was her career goal. She felt so lucky to work in an agency in which a community work approach was allowed and supported:

Doing organising work was my career goal, and that is why I joined this team [as I know the team is using a community work approach]; so, it does not make sense if I do not use community work. The team atmosphere was another factor, all team members were passionate to do CD, you know, communication among team members was essential. Furthermore, honestly speaking, I did not find hindrances made by my supervisors. As I know in some agencies [which operate social service teams], organising work was prohibited by the management, [staff members were] receiving strong management pressure. So, based on my understanding in my agency and in my unit, we could do so [use the community work approach], and employing organizing work was the right method to respond to unfair social policies, so why should we not employ organising work?

[Participant 5/UR]

The two participants [5&6/UR] were working in the same team. Both were committed to joining the community work sector. In URSST, an atmosphere in

the workplace was created through team members' interaction, and whether team members were fresh graduates or seasoned social workers was one of the critical determinants of whether a team could employ a community organising approach. In addition, this participant [6/UR] performed a role model function, which was vital in the workplace for novice workers, like another participant [5/UR], in selecting and learning a new professional role; accordingly, individuals learn from peers who conveyed a particular interpretation of the job (Ibarra, 1999):

Besides, as said, our team members combined with several experienced workers; they all were experienced colleagues, and we did not consider whether we should use organising work.

[Participant 5/UR]

In addition, using the community work approach was also a tactical consideration regarding the specific context of urban redevelopment because workers believed that the approach could unite residents to exchange information with the operator. As a result, residents could grasp more comprehensive information, resulting in a better offer from the operator. The two practitioners [5&6/UR] made every endeavour to fight for residents' welfare and believed clients did have their freedom of choice:

In addition, employing a community work approach in the URSST was a working tactic that could support residents and connect them together to fight for their best interests. It could also prevent residents from obtaining a partial picture or information about the compensation

package if they were only contacted by the operator on a one-to-one basis: Employing community organising was a must! Residents should take part in discussing the issue. I did not have any experience, but my partner shared with me lots that the authority [a redevelopment operator] liked to engage residents on an individual basis, ..... that was deals were made hiddenly [with residents] that it was not identical to other residents [in terms of compensation package], we think it was not fair to those residents who had to make a deal with the authority earlier as the deal made later mostly would be better than previous deals.

[Participant 5/ UR]

Another social worker [8/UR] in URSST, who perceived herself as a community worker but was situated in an unfavourable working environment endeavoured to perform her role well under pressure. However, she [8/UR] had to hide some of her work, which echoes another participant [4/UR] who mentioned that in some NGOs, community work was not allowed. The worker [8/UR] then shared that as a community worker she even could not openly support residents who took part in social actions:

You know, we were doing community organising work. I knew if a resident was going to express his view openly when he took part in social action, he needed social workers accompanying him for support, as he was having a breakthrough from his comfort zone, overcoming himself at that moment. However, we could not play this role because of avoidance. I even could not accompany my client during the eviction when officers moved him out.

[Participant 8/ UR]

This participant [8/UR] has to take into account the concerns of her employing organisation and the funding body:

My boss considered the factors why we needed to accompany the resident. If we presented in the unit during an eviction, we needed to justify our action, such as monitoring the resident's emotions, as there were people from the concerned group and civil society. I was concerned about the authority's [redevelopment operator] perception of this situation. Also, we need to prepare to explain to the authorities.

[Participant 8/ UR]

For this participant [8/UR], she was determined to employ a community organising approach. To her, the community work approach was only a means to help affected clients overcome adversities under urban redevelopment. She thought the essence of employing a community work approach was the mindset, not the method:

I do not think I must employ community organising work. I always think, how to say? How do I understand the meaning of employing community organising work? I think organising work is not necessary to be done by me. My thought has long been that I want residents to settle their problems. All families have faced their problems. As I am a community worker who is affected by the analytic framework, it is easy for me to link up their family problems with the overall compensation policy, I can see this relationship quickly. Then I think about how I can break

through this system. At the end of the day, I can help those residents, and during my entire helping process, I just hope residents can settle their problems.

[Participant 8/ UR]

Although the significance of professional socialisation has been acknowledged as a crucial factor in forming identity, this can be criticised because it may regard professionals as overly determined via processes of moulding and as passive recipients (Webb, 2017a). In the above participant's [8/UR] case, she was socialised to keep using the community work approach not only by being moulded but also through interactive ways. To uphold her community work values, she had to manage various stakeholders' perspectives and search for the maximum space for implementation. Her firm values were built up by her in-depth understanding of community development theories and her continuous practice, bringing challenges and persistence together. In the process, she needed to relate to her residents, colleagues, supervisor, co-workers, officers in the workplace, and even members of concerned groups. All of them held different but sometimes conflictual views and values. Goldenberg and Iwasiw (1993, p. 4) describe professionalisation as "a complex and interactive process by which the content of the professional role, skills, knowledge, behaviour is learned, and the values, attitudes, and goals, integral to the profession and sense of occupational identity which are characterised of a member of that profession are internalised". This participant's [8/UR] impressive adaptability in



integrating what she learned and experienced in the field is a testament to her professional growth.

Workplace organisations can exert influence on practitioners' professional lives not only through identity work but also through the regulation of professional conduct (Webb, 2017a). That is to say, identity formation will act negatively if organisational coercion appears. If workers are in a workplace where employing community work is taboo, this may apply negative pressure in identity formation – being a community worker is not a preferred identity in the setting. For the participant [4/UR] below, such coercion was connected to the funding mechanism; when he spoke about using the community work approach, he linked it with professional autonomy by associating this with a recent result of the tendering exercise at that time in the field - a URSST was not able to renew its service contract even though its serving redevelopment project had not been terminated. This participant [4/UR] guessed and worried whether the failure of the URSST concerned was due to its efforts in employing a community organising approach that made an impact on the operator's compensation plan:

Overall, I think professional autonomy was enough until recently when all service contracts were reallocated after a tendering exercise. Now, the situation is not stable, and I worry about it. The situation was created by the funder, which I feel worried about. Also, most of my colleagues had this worry.

[Participant 4/UR]

No in the past [URSST operator cannot renew its service contract while its responsible redevelopment project has not finished]. All projects currently operated [by existing operators] could be continued, except for a new operator in that project [where the said original team was replaced]. My team has no change [in this tendering exercise]. The change over the whole URSST landscape led me to think of some consequences after employing some working methods [like the community work approach]. This is a question mark.

[Participant 4/ UR]

The condition [the link between a contract not being renewed and doing advocacy work] could not be confirmed.... I did not know too much.... I could not confirm what agency A or agency B were doing...maybe based on some consequence after doing something [organising work] by the agency....it would be relating to the funding body or parties concerned, there was some worry, would there be some 'revenge', there was a discussion about this.....even our team had this discussion, really worry, could not confirm, purely a worry, the atmosphere in recent two months was strange.

[Participant 4/ UR]

According to the participant's [4/UR] sharing, the linkage between the organisational coercion and the funding mechanism was subtle in this case because no evidence was found to support the association. Nevertheless, this participant worries that organising work generated a negative effect on

renewing the team's service contract and may hinder practitioners from exercising their autonomy in the CWSS settings. This participant [4/UR] even thought this particular worry might lead to self-censorship. In fact, regarding self-censorship, this participant has experienced a related situation in his team:

I ask whether my team has self-censorship every day. Some of our colleagues who left the team did have visible 'self-censorship'. They dared not to hold the residents' group, apart from being afraid of the funder, as our team had only employed casework for many years; our 'self-censorship' might not have been caused by the funder but by the culture of our agency. Some working methods had been built for a long period, so the 'censorship' was stronger than those made by the funder. I think in day-to-day practice, 'self-censorship' did appear, but I am not sure if it appeared in the whole team.

[Participant 4/ UR]

As value-driven professionals, social workers are expected to uphold a set of core values, which should be reflected in direct practice. However, the data illustrated that some social workers had ambivalent experiences in performing and maintaining their professional identity and in selecting their intervention methods. This can be seen as workers' difficulties in exercising their professional autonomy.

### **6.3 Challenges of multiple accountabilities**

Autonomy closely relates to jurisdiction, particularly in an organisational context where various specialists are working together, like the studied social service teams which were governed by a contracted-out mechanism. Owing to the funding mechanism, social workers and other professionals were connected with a competitive relationship regarding who could dominate the discourse in the workplace, which was beneficial to achieving their professional goals. Abbott's (1988) classic analysis of professions points out that not all professions can gain full jurisdictional status within an interacting system where they are located in an ecology of competitive relationships. Social workers have been one of those professionals who had to settle for limited jurisdiction.

Social workers' ambiguity in performing their identity freely to a certain extent was a signal of losing their identity in the face of a contracted-out mechanism. Originally, these contracted-out social service teams were established to facilitate the achievement of the funding bodies' organisational goals with particular policy backgrounds. On the other hand, under an employer-employee relationship, social workers should work in ways that adhere to the organisational goals of the serving organisations they belong to. Therefore, social workers in CWSS were accountable to multiple parties, including their clients (residents), employers (NGOs) and the funding bodies. Unavoidably, there were conflicts of interest between these stakeholders, and social workers had to make ethical decisions about how to handle these conflicts.

In addition, according to the general assumptions of professional ethics and codes of practice, social workers should typically prioritise service users' interests over those of other parties (British Association of Social Workers, 2012). The social service team should also aim to help residents cope with adversities caused by compliance with building ordinances and urban renewal.

Grounded from the data, 'multiple accountabilities' are identified as the condition or prerequisite of social workers being ambivalent in performing their professional identity. As noted previously, regarding the situation in BDSST when social workers were facing difficulties in explaining their role to residents, some social workers chose to introduce themselves as staff of the department. They thought the contractual relationship between the funding body and their organisations was too complicated to explain to residents. Moreover, residents might question whether social workers would stand up for their welfare, especially when there was a conflict of interest between the department and the residents. This scenario would not appear if social service teams were solely managed and funded by the operating NGOs because multiple accountabilities to the funding bodies and social workers' employing organisations did not exist.

In another BDSST incident A, when the social worker [1/BD] did not employ a community work approach to fight for residents' rights, he was ashamed of his handling of the case where he only supported residents' tangible needs rather than advocated for them. The department expected the social worker [1/BD] to facilitate an eviction while he was aware that there was room for using

advocacy work to improve the prevailing resettlement policy. Similar to the issues involved when making self-introductions to residents, this social worker [1/BD] was situated between the residents and the funding body. Hence, the opposite interests between the residents and the department were apparent; residents were not compliant with the building ordinances while the department was responsible for enforcement. This conflict would not appear if these social service teams were not funded by the department because the survival issue for the social service teams would be excluded. In principle, the ultimate goal of fulfilling residents' welfare needs should otherwise create no variance between the social workers concerned and those of their employing agencies. Nevertheless, the contracted-out mechanism framed the power relations in the CWSS. This power was so strong that it affected not only frontline practitioners but also their supervisors and even employing organizations.

#### **6.4 Low legitimation of community work**

The discussions above inform that multiple accountabilities are the prerequisite of workers' identity crises. However, under this condition, there is also a cause-and-effect relation between the identity crisis and the low legitimation of community work. Webb (2017b, p. 233), emphasises the role of legitimation in shaping professional identity, stating, "Legitimation does confirm and cultivate professional identity, while claims for specialised formal knowledge are essential in power relations." Ashforth and Mael (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) summarise professional identity as consisting of three

main factors: distinctiveness, prestige and the salience of out-groups. Accordingly, distinctiveness refers to a profession's values and practices in relation to other comparable groups; prestige is the second factor with an emphasis on status, reputation and credentials. The third antecedent factor, which again highlights the significance of relational factors, is identified as the salience of the out-group, whereby awareness of the out-group reinforces an awareness of one's in-group.

At an operational level, the legitimacy of a profession comes from the power over particular work tasks as well as their signature skills and external recognition (Webb, 2017a). Two areas providing fertile ground for examining struggles for worth legitimacy and recognition concerning professional identity are 'forms of knowledge in practice' and 'inter-professional partnerships and collaboration' (Webb, 2017b). Therefore, to examine the legitimation of the social work profession, it makes sense to take stock of practitioners' works and skills, as well as how the external stakeholders (other professionals collaborated in the settings) recognised these within the context of this study.

Overall, in both BDSST and URSST, the social work profession was appointed by funding bodies to attain their organisational goals. The following is a summary of these two teams' core work tasks and skills required, as consolidated by my extensive hands-on experience in managing these teams and relating to frontline workers and officers:

1. To handle cases referred by other specialists helping them solve their problems.
2. To provide professional advice to the funding bodies for exercising discretion when handling difficult cases.
3. To provide training to other specialists in the CWSS based on social work knowledge and skills.
4. To liaise with residents, politicians and various types of stakeholders in the community regarding the core business of the funding bodies.
5. To be involved in residents' groups, pressure groups, or interest groups regarding social actions planned and taken by these groups; some of these activists expected social workers to support them.

The above work tasks were perceived as essential and were generally recognised by the funding bodies, except item 5, which workers needed to do but seldom disclosed to funding bodies. In general, the signature skills of social workers in CWSS may be those skills that social workers should possess, such as communication skills, casework skills, knowledge of human understanding, problem-solving skills and networking skills.

From co-workers' (officers of the department and redevelopment operator) perspective, the signature skills of social workers were 'handling difficult cases' and 'providing professional advice to officers justifying their discretion'. When human factors were hindrances for residents who were being asked to comply with building ordinances (in BDSST) and going through the urban redevelopment process (in URSST), social workers were recognised as having the expertise to remove such hindrances because of their knowledge and



skills in the understanding of human and social work intervention. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that knowledge and skills relating to community work, including organising work, were absent from this skills list. I do not include this because these skills have not been apparently recognised in this setting, and practitioners most likely deliver work item 5 in a hidden manner. Furthermore, the funding bodies' service outputs were cases or assignments relating to individual residents affected by the policies concerned.

Legitimation concerning workers' professional identity can also be understood from a socio-psychological perspective. Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway (2006, p. 55) reviewed various definitions of legitimacy from both social psychological and institutional approaches, and identified some fundamental similarities:

“legitimacy is a collective construal process through which a social object is judged to be right; it depends on apparent consensus that most people accept the object as legitimate among actors in the local situation; legitimacy is being consistent with cultural beliefs, norms, and values that shared by social audience in the local situation or in a broader community; a cognitive dimension of legitimacy constitutes the object for actors as a valid and objective social feature while a prescriptive dimension represents the social object as right respectively”.

To examine a legitimacy process in the researched context following Johnson's perspective, both the social object in question and to whom it is

a legitimate matter. Regarding the social object, central to the analysis of this study that brought workers a sense of struggling is whether they could employ community work. Hence, community work is a social object for further analysis.

On the other hand, establishing social service teams in urban redevelopment and building safety landscapes was another social object because the funding organisations tried to apply social work to address specific policy areas. Specifically, the Buildings Department had never established an in-house social service team since 2002, while the first Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance stated that the social work profession must be engaged during urban redevelopment by utilising a social service team employed by the Urban Renewal Authority. Objectively, these social service teams have received their legitimacy since their establishment because the funding organisations officially endorsed it through the contracted-out mechanism, the formulation of scopes and objectives, and related evaluation mechanisms planted in specific funding organisations. In this sense, the legitimization of social service teams as a subset of the funding organisations occurred explicitly.

To analyse social workers' ambivalence towards using a community work approach, it is helpful first to understand the service positioning of the social service teams concerning funding bodies and the profession's perspective since these positionings definitely impact workers' thoughts as expressed in the data.

In Hong Kong, community work or community development is classified as one of the three social work methods (casework, group work and community

work). Community workers employed by non-governmental organisations in Hong Kong are registered social workers. Traditionally, these social work methods are linked with particular settings. For example, casework is commonly used in clinical settings, and group work is widely used when working with various target groups such as youth, the elderly, people with physical or mental disabilities, etc. In this sense, community work is assumed to be employed in community development services. Although workers worried about using community work, it was one of the social work methods that should not be ruled out. However, workers' theoretical autonomy in being able to choose to use the approach was not reflected in practice from the data. Therefore, if social workers' freedom of choice in using intervention methods was limited, their professional autonomy in selecting working methods was threatened. In turn, the welfare of their clients might be harmed too. There appeared to be a legitimacy issue regarding using the community work approach.

Based on the information provided by participants of this study, all social service teams of the URSST group belonged to the community service branch of their own agencies with different names; however, the location of the group BDSST was diversified, in locations using terms such as community development services, community work or even special projects. Although those divisions were named community work, there was no information about the exact meaning or mission that they adhered to. However, according to one of the participants in the interviews, her agency had written its mission

statement, which was in line with the definitions of community work that are widely accepted in the local context.

In fact, when the social work profession was introduced to urban redevelopment and building safety landscapes, funding bodies understood that they were engaging the profession in their core businesses. On the other hand, from the funding bodies' viewpoint, these teams were only positioned as 'social service teams' with specific scopes and objectives. Besides, as a matter of fact, the specifications of these social service teams only defined the service targets and the service objectives and did not confine the intervention methods that might be used within these teams to specific social work approaches. Therefore, this configuration implies practitioners should have autonomy in choosing methods. However, the service output set by the funding bodies in the Social Services Team of the Buildings Department was the number of cases rendered. In this department, cases that building officers referred to social workers were called assignments. It can be seen that community work deliverables were not included in the required service outputs. There was a similar situation in the Urban Renewal Social Service Team, despite individual social service teams proposing the service outputs. Therefore, it can be concluded that the funding bodies had never positioned these teams as community work teams.

Regarding whom the social objects were legitimate since legitimacy is a collective construal process, targets of legitimacy therefore involved multiple targets, including funding bodies, workers' colleagues and supervisors, residents (clients), community workers in the sector and social activists

concerned with residents' rights. They all were social audiences, but they held different values and even opposite values in some situations.

Firstly, the funding bodies in CWSS did not care whether these teams were categorised as community work services; they only emphasised how these teams could help attain their organisational goals. Secondly, the collective view of frontline workers could have been more varied and robust, and they could not compromise one agreed discourse regarding the positioning of these teams. Worse still, some traditional community development practitioners commented on the social service teams' role and questioned their professional autonomy and independence. Under such diversified and opposite views to the SST, gaining external audiences' support was not easy for them. The struggle for recognition in delivering community work was real and significant. Consequently, from operating organisations' perspectives, due to the contracted-out mechanism, they had to take into account funding bodies' views for the sake of their teams' survival.

### **6.5 Emotional distress and failure to establish a credible identity**

Throughout the journey of performing professional identity, participants experienced different levels of emotional distress, such as shame, frustration, anger, and helplessness, which were related to their ambiguity in performing professional identity in CWSS. Leigh (2017) pointed out that there is a difference between affect and emotion; the latter is forced by the former. Instead of only describing practitioners' ordinary emotions, Wetherell (2012)

suggested focusing on people's and their wider groups' affective practices to understand how they are attracted or pained by certain social interactions in the identity journey.

Overall, participants' bad emotions were mainly aroused by the limitations in employing a community work approach and the tensions between their social worker role and employee identity within their organisations. There are two examples reflecting workers' affective practice in this setting. For a social worker in BDSST, emotions of anger and shamefulness about a negative impact on his deficient professional identity meant he needed to do covert actions whilst seeking to please the officers. His way out was to indirectly use the community work approach by co-working with community workers of the resident alliance. In another example, a URSST worker [8/UR], loneliness and helplessness were the triggered emotions. These were mainly caused by her colleagues, who she saw as sharing an opposite set of values to hers. This was the worker's subjective meaning in her work context. Her colleagues used a casework approach and were willing to obey the funding body. Although casework and community work approaches could be viewed as complementary in application, in this participant's personal experience, this was not the case. This participant made every endeavour to make a breakthrough by testing her supervisor's baseline. She liked escorting clients to hear a district council meeting and over-turned a conservative way that her colleagues used to write complaint letters for residents; by doing this, she fully engaged with residents who eventually built up a trustful relationship with her.

In this sense, the forces that pushed participants to have emotional distress included their perspectives about community work, which should have covered advocacy or organising work. Besides, their upset about being the minority in secondary settings also impacted their resilience.

These reactions, involving an affective dimension involved in social workers' doing and feeling in different situations regularly in practice, were one consequence of the ways in which participants' professional identities were shaped.

Additionally, other workers often failed to establish a credible professional identity in the setting, which was another consequence of workers' ambiguity in performing professional identity. Goffman (1959, p. 198) contends that "during the journey of identity formation, the crucial concern of the 'self' is whether it will be credited or discredited, and being seen as credible is a characteristic trait that is performed when we are in interaction with others". Manning (2000, p. 284) once suggested "credibility as being 'the quality of being believed' and that this quality was 'integral to both trust and deception', and further argued that the 'production of credibility' was a way in which people made their actions convincing to other people". Nevertheless, accomplishing credibility in social work is not a straightforward process; instead, it can unsettle thoughts and feelings as it demands that the social worker question their values and loyalties to others (Leigh, 2017). The workers' emotional response resulted from their values and loyalty to clients being challenged. The legitimisation of community work was too low for them to employ. Furthermore, with a low legitimisation of community work in secondary

settings, some participants hid their identities or did not fully exercise their professional autonomy. Some participants had to take hidden actions (see Chapter 7) in order to protect residents' welfare and, in turn, to earn residents' recognition of their work. In contrast, they were only recognised in the job areas that assisted funding bodies in achieving their organisational goals. therefore, under this contradiction, both their negative emotions and weak credibility of the profession were indeed a spiral effect.

Multiple accountabilities characterised community work in secondary settings, practitioners had to earn recognition from various stakeholders, whose standards of achieving a credible identity for the social work profession were too varied, mainly when two types of stakeholders, say residents and funding bodies, were having conflictual interests. Consequently, if residents recognised social workers for their work commitments, the funder's organisational goals would not be catered to, or vice versa. Hence, the questions about loyalty and the core values aforementioned were indeed a critical challenge to practitioners in CWSS. It was not feasible for social workers in CWSS to build up a credible professional identity for all stakeholders simultaneously.

## **6.6 Practitioners' commitment to the profession and organisations**

According to Glaser's Six C's theoretical coding family, contingencies affect the direction of variables that generate categories, which in turn, entail the consequences created by such categories.



Grounded from the data, I judged both practitioners' commitment to the profession (social work and community work) and to the organisations to be contingencies that generate the category of social workers' being ambivalent in performing their professional identity in CWSS and its effects. That is to say that although causes (low legitimation of community work) of producing a specific category exist, the impact on the category might vary on forces of contingencies identified. In contrast, the latter means that consequences (emotional distress and failure to establish a credible identity) made by the category might not emerge, depending on the condition of the contingencies identified.

In wider literature, Meyer, Becker, and Rolf (2006) thought 'identity' emphasises a more passive psychological self regarding collective groups and organisations, while commitment involves a more active focus on behaviours, social exchange, and strategies.

The term commitment is "a force that binds an individual to a course of action" (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001, p. 301); as "a specific psychological bond" between a person and their targets, which can be standalone elements or be multidimensional, characterised by dedication, caring, a willingness to give of oneself and responsibility" (Klein, Molloy, & Brinsfield, 2012, p. 137). The targets of commitment can be an individual, a profession, an organisation, a supervisor, a team, colleagues, or service users; they can also complement or conflict with each other and involve practitioners' self-concept and professional identities (Clements et al., 2014).

Meyer and Allen (1984) identify three components of commitment: 1) affective, 2) continuance and 3) normative. Community workers in this study demonstrated both affective and normative commitment in practice. Affective commitment emphasises “wanting to stay, a desire to belong, individual value congruence and ‘positive feelings of identification with, attachment, and involvement in the work” (Meyer & Allen, 1984, p. 375). It is enhanced by “worker/ organisational culture ‘fit’, collegiality, perceived support, leadership and active engagement” (Collins, 2017, p. 152). Due to a rooted and widely accepted perception of community development, participants in this research genuinely thought they should employ community organising or advocacy work in practice, even under an unfavourable environment. As a result, their professional identity was strengthened.

In social service teams where a community work atmosphere was nurtured, an affective commitment was identified since team members experienced a positive professional identification through colleagues’ mutual support and chances provided to actualising community work core values. For example, the two social workers [5&6/UR] who launched a successful piece of organising work in a URSST possessed a solid professional identity; their clients, colleagues and supervisors recognised their professional role well. They held a traditional perspective in community work and were determined to apply it into practice, and never queried whether they could do community work in the service context. They did not experience hindrances to using the approach, even under complicated political dynamics during the helping

process. This can explain why workers' [5&6/UR] ambiguity did not exist even under the same context and condition where other participants were. At the same time, practitioners' normative commitment reflected their commitment to the profession, which can be seen as "a measure, or indicator, of behaviour towards one's profession and the efforts that are invested in it" (Collins, 2015, p. 162). The two participants' affective commitment was established on their foundation of having a normative commitment to community work, which entails these workers doing their duty of what they feel they 'should' or 'ought' to do – advocacy and organising work in practice (Meyer & Allen, 1984).

Nevertheless, not all other participants could experience affective commitment as their workplaces were not as supportive as these two participants had experienced. For example, a male participant [1/BD], who was working in a BDSST, felt helpless and shameful about his inability to do advocacy work. Although he knew he should offer help to the residents, he questioned his inability to do advocacy work that addressed the structural problem. Instead, he only offered practical support to residents. Furthermore, a mirroring effect triggered his shamefulness when he found his collaborators, some other social workers working with the concerned group, could do community work to help the same group of residents. This participant faced adversities alone, without backup from his colleagues and agency.

On the other hand, another social worker [4/UR] who worked without organisational support always questioned and even queried his professional identity in the urban renewal context when he needed to judge cases of high indeterminacy.

In Hong Kong, community work is part of the social work profession. Commitment to social work is important because it is associated with motivation, values, recruitment, job satisfaction, job retention, job turnover, and work performance (Westbrook, 2006). Collins (2017) thought that if social workers were committed to their jobs, they could ensure good quality, committed service to their organisations and service users.

One worker [8/UR] expressed her ultimate commitment to social work as a profession, not only community work. She was the only participant who did not insist on pursuing a traditional perspective of community development. Her supervisor did not want to break the harmonious relationship with the funding body, while her colleagues believed they should obey the funder. When picturing such an unsupportive environment, she put clients' welfare in the foreground and endeavoured to minimise this hostile environment's impact. She was determined to use community work with a broad and flexible perspective. She thought community work was not the only intervention that workers must employ. The most important thing she cared for was the residents' welfare, relating to whether they could settle down earlier during the process of urban renewal. When most practitioners were worrying whether they could use community work or committed to community work, this participant [8/UR] concentrated on fighting for the client's welfare. Her ultimate goal was to use social work methods to release clients' suffering. Community work to her was not limited to using any methods or strategies but a mindset that enhanced the client's consciousness to settle their problems. This involved empowering the clients to take control of their situations and

make informed decisions. She seldom complained about difficulty using community work methods; she only paid attention to clients' recovery from adversity. For this participant [8/UR], commitment to social work led her to get rid of upholding a traditional perspective of community development and be more flexible in making interventions. Hence, this participant's professional autonomy was strengthened and helped build up a strong professional identity (Giffords, 2009).

In terms of organisational commitment, there are two elements, role clarity and loyalty, associated with (Boyas & Wind, 2010). However, practitioners' organisational commitment to CWSS was complicated because of its feature of having multiple accountabilities to two organisations, the funding body and the employing organisations.

Regarding role clarity, the community worker's role in social service teams was ambivalent. It was clearer if workers were practising in a team where community work was supported. In other words, if a team's organisational goal was to actualise community work, its workers could commit to the profession and the organisation. However, in contrast, most workers were located in an unfavourable environment. For example, some organisations preferred to be low-profile, while others focused on maintaining a harmonious relationship with the funding body. For workers in this type of organisation, if they chose to be loyal to residents, but their organisations did not when there was a conflict of interest between residents and the funding body, workers did feel difficulty committing to their employing organisations.

Ironically, organisational goals in CWSS that were opposite to practitioners' normative commitment to community work may still maintain a positive collaborative relationship with stakeholders and funding bodies only because workers have to follow their employing organisations' goal to keep projects at hand sustainable. Again, this was a survival issue; managerial staff who well understood this crisis would exert their impact on practitioners through supervision, meetings, and daily interaction in the settings. For instance, one of the participants [9/BD] shared in an interview that her supervisor spent most of the time in an official meeting to please the senior officer. This scenario echoes some scholars' thought that organisational commitment was another extrinsic force against professional commitment, with affective commitment to an organisation taking place over time (Clements et al., 2014). Ideally, if a social worker develops an organisational commitment to a particular agency they work with, a strong belief in organisational goals and values would be built up. Such a social worker may exert considerable effort on behalf of the organisation (Jaskyte & Lee, 2009). In the above situation, if the manager maintained this atmosphere in the team consistently, and team members did not object or even agree that the team's survival was paramount, the culture of pleasing authority figures would be rationalised. Therefore, the commitment of practitioners to their profession is critical. Practitioners, whether they align or oppose their organisation's goals, and whose commitment to their professions may vary, can significantly influence the direction of variables towards the category of 'ambiguity in performing their professional identity'.

In principle, alternatively, social workers can commit themselves to resistance, maintaining professional commitment by challenging organisational practice to change its policies or guidelines that were encouraged by radical and ecological approaches. Professional values include a requirement to challenge harmful, unjust, and unfair practices (British Association of Social Workers, 2012). Similar guidance was included in the code of practice of Hong Kong (Social Workers Registration Board, 2021).

However, according to data collected from all participants, none of them had taken apparent actions to challenge their employing agencies' organisational goals. Actually, it was difficult for them to pinpoint the ways that goal setting or actions taken by their agencies were unjust. Organisations' intentions to keep their projects sustainable and maintain a good working relationship with the funding bodies were deemed to be appropriate. Also, the supervisor's stances in relating to representatives of funding bodies were too subtle to be openly challenged and discussed by practitioners.

Overall, grounded in the data, participants' commitment to the profession and the organisations were contingencies that impacted participants' ambiguity in performing their professional identity. There was obvious tension between participants' commitment to organisations and the profession. When participants' commitment to the profession was more substantial than that to organisations, their ambiguity of performing professional identity will be avoided, even under a disabling environment – participants did not have ambiguity because they accepted the reality that they were working in secondary settings. Among the participants, some chose to commit to the

profession, some chose to commit to organisations, and some chose to balance two opposite forces, highlighting the complexity of professional identity. The identities the participants chose did reflect their direction of commitment. The question is how they balanced different commitments in dilemma situations. Such stances played a crucial role in producing and reproducing workers' ambiguity in performing their professional identity and minimising its harm. Most importantly, practitioners should hold a correct conception of service ideals, which is critical for their enactment of professionalism.

## **6.7 Concluding remarks**

This chapter presents how participants of this study showed ambiguity in doing their identity work, which is pivotal in understanding practitioners' professional lives in CWSS, particularly their interrelationship with their clients, employing NGOs and funding bodies. According to the findings presented in the above section, community workers in both Social Service Teams in the Buildings Department (BDSST) and Urban Renewal Social Service Teams (URSST) faced significant challenges in employing a community work approach. Only a minority of them could freely employ the community work approach in their settings, which sometimes harmed practitioners' self-concepts of their professional role. This phenomenon was a professional issue, challenging social workers to produce their professional identity. Using Glaser's Six C's coding family, it was shown that the community work secondary settings were characterised by having multiple



accountabilities and inter-professional collaboration, which was governed by a contracted-out funding mechanism. Additionally, community work's legitimation was low when these social service teams were established. Consequently, at the individual level, practitioners experienced emotional distress, and the profession as a whole failed to build up a credible collective identity in the CWSS. Nevertheless, a linear causal-effect relationship did not operate the dynamic of identity work; practitioners' differing commitments to the profession and the organisations could prevent them from having identity crises and being affected by their negative impacts.

# **Chapter 7 Use of phronesis in tackling ethically difficult situations**

## **7.1 Introduction**

Understandably, social workers do experience dilemmas in practice. However, it is worth investigating practitioners' accounts of their thoughts and feelings in taking hidden actions, a salient finding in this research, to resolve dilemmas in a professional context. Therefore, after analysing practitioners' identity crisis in Chapter 6, this chapter continuously draws on Glaser's Six C's theoretical coding family to inform the analysis of the second core category, how workers use phronesis in tackling ethically difficult situations by 'taking hidden actions in practice'.

## **7.2 Taking hidden actions in practice**

'Taking hidden actions' to resolve dilemma situations in professional practice is the core category being investigated in this chapter. The data shows that all participants had encountered dilemma situations in practice, of which some had taken interventions hidden from their colleagues, supervisors, co-workers, and representatives of the funding bodies while responding to those dilemmas.

'Taking hidden actions' was not the exact term that participants used in the interviews. Some participants' wordings implied that actions were hidden, as in the extracts below:

‘.....do something under the table’

[Participant 1/BD]]

‘Although I did not disclose the incident to my colleagues....’

[Participant 8/UR]

‘We had done something that could not be known by officers, quite tricky

[Participant 1/BD]

Meanwhile, I based the identification of this category on participants’ accounts of incident details and judged whether the actions they took were done in a hidden manner. The term ‘hidden actions in practice’ in this thesis means interventions or actions that were undertaken with purpose, where participants prevented these actions from being discovered by funding bodies, their colleagues and/or employing organisations. Four types of hidden actions are consolidated based on the data collected as follows:

1. Practices out of the service scopes set by funding bodies.
2. Actions against the supervisor’s instructions.
3. Actions with possible outcomes that may conflict with the interests of the funding bodies or employing agencies.
4. Breaking the rules and regulations.

As actions were hidden, workers did not record them in reports or recordings. Nevertheless, social workers who took hidden actions in this study were found to have their justifications. Workers typically argued that they aimed to hide

those actions from funding bodies and employing agencies to achieve certain good intentions for clients' welfare.

One social worker [9/BD] even perceived hidden actions as a way to demonstrate social work values in secondary settings. This was because she thought the social service teams needed to strive for their own survival where these actions could help the service contracts of social service teams could be renewed. She strongly complained about secondary settings by concluding that social workers had to take hidden actions to adhere to professional values. She implied that in some contexts, those behaviours with good intentions recognised by the professionals would otherwise not be allowed to be performed in these settings:

The overall feeling was that SST [social service teams] does not have a unique identity; it is only a part of the system. Officers shifted their difficulties to you [SST] because you are part of the system. Regarding the profession, I felt we 'keep alive'; you [social workers] have to do something under the table if you want to uphold your values and beliefs, as you are not permitted to do so.

[Participant 9/BD]

### **7.2.1 Urgency for decision-making**

According to the data, under two prerequisite conditions did these hidden actions take place. The first was an urgency for decision-making.

By looking deep into two hidden actions which were identified as having high severity regarding deviation levels, one related to disloyalty to the agency, whereas the other was about breaking the law, we can examine how these incidents approached critical points where the residents' welfare would probably be harmed. In incident C, where a social worker [2/BD] removed an official notice, the eviction date was nearer although she had persistently lobbied the responsible officer, she could not persuade the officer to postpone or cancel the eviction. Because of an older resident's suffering from heart disease that made him too weak to cope with the crisis, the client was approaching a critical point when his psychological and physical welfare would be threatened. The social worker [2/BD] worried that his heart disease would relapse. In his old age, this would be a life-threatening incident. The nearer the eviction date, the higher the urgency became. Therefore, the worker decided to act, even though she had considered that her actions would be illegal:

When you asked me if I was not concerned about it being a legal document, I remembered my consideration at that time, I had another perspective. I knew if the notice was posted up and the older owner did have heart disease if he had seen this, and he thought he was a person who would never break the law. His flat was suddenly changed to be illegal after living there for an extended period. When you posted up, although BD said the owner could apply for the re-entry permit, not too many applications were made from an older man's perspective.

[Participant 2/BD/Incident C]

In this situation, if the worker chose to take this hidden action, she violated specific rules or commitments in situations where officers are concerned about these actions being discovered. The worker took a high-risk action by removing an official notice posted by the law enforcement department for the sake of his psychological and physical well-being. Because of her prolonged relationship with the older resident, she understood well how vulnerable to ill health that older resident was. She estimated that the older resident's heart disease might be provoked by his emotional disturbance caused by the fact that he could not accept the reality that he broke the law. On the one hand, this participant [2/BD] had no confidence in persuading the older resident to change his mind; she confirmed that he was likely to collapse if he found out he was being prosecuted. Hence, to her, removing the notice was the only thing she could do in facing the dilemma:

What could I do if the client [had a] stroke after finding the notice? To dial 999 or to counsel his wife? I could not accept this. He had stayed in hospital...the matter was postponed for a while since he stayed in the hospital when you saw the older man...I told him to check his blood pressure; it was around 180... so high...very high....so how could you....I did not think how I could persuade him, even though I had known him for several years, but it really took time...really took time. To let him understand and accept reality, and I was really incapable of persuading him within a limited time.

[Participant 2/BD/Incident C]

In incident G, where social workers [5&6/BD] were not indifferent to residents' self-initiative in taking action against the funding body by fighting for the team's continuous service. There were two approaching critical points. The first was the team's contract end date when the worker-client relationship was finished. The social workers understood that they could no longer support residents in settling outstanding matters on their compensation package, and residents needed to negotiate with the authorities continuously. The social workers worried about whether their successor would be experienced enough to quickly support residents in handling the complicated issue. Secondly, workers were approaching another critical point when residents launched their social actions. Workers had to decide how to support residents and meet their employing agency's expectations:

Upon the announcement of the tendering result that we lost the contract, in our meeting, we were pretty emotional, I was impressed by one of our colleagues who said in a meeting that "we hoped to serve residents continuously, but we could not let people think we were 'sore losers'". This was the tension till now. In that process, we had many considerations, e.g. think how to discuss with residents, especially when we did not grasp the working method of the new team...tension might be bigger....really needed to walk with residents in the path against the funder, not against the new team.... much consideration at that time, we did not want public thought we made use of residents, we were reluctant to separate with residents.

[Participant 6/UR/Incident G]

In contrast, when comparing with another mild level hidden action in incident P, the critical point where the worker [9/BD] concerned about residents' welfare would probably be at risk was the moment that she informed her supervisor about the discovery of a group of residents residing in illegal buildings. In this case, the worker did not passively wait for the critical moment. Instead, she could control the timing. In other words, the critical moment might not have appeared if she had kept this matter hidden. When this young social worker [9/BD], who paid continuous home visits to a group of residents that were out of the service scope, was asked the reason why she chose to keep it secret, she provided the following evidence:

Although I did not disclose the incident to my colleagues, I have asked them. I have tested this. I have asked them. And my colleagues answered me firmly that they must report to the department.

[Participant 9/BD/Incident P]

My colleagues said we are SST. We earned money from the department. Also, the department hired you as a social worker, so you must tell the department. My colleagues thought that reporting to the department was a safe way. That was if we did something, but the department did not know this, they thought it was unsuitable for the SST.

[Participant 9/BD/Incident P]

With such a straightforward answer from her colleagues, this participant concluded that the welfare of the residents would not be improved if she disclosed to her agency that she paid regular home visits.



### **7.2.2 Undecidability**

Apart from moments of urgency, workers faced moments of undecidability when there were deadlock situations that involved opposing parties, and no progress could be made because of fundamental disagreement. For example, the following two participants [5&6/UR] encountered an ethical dilemma of choosing between being loyal to their residents and their employing agency. This occurred when the residents launched a series of social actions against the funding body's decision not to renew the service contract of the two social workers' teams. To avoid being misunderstood by the public that the agency was making use of residents to create pressure on the funding body, the management of the agency instructed the two social workers that they should not take part in residents' actions:

We thought the residents were so passionate, and at that time, we considered their needs. They needed our service. Although you [agency] said we had a conflict of interest, residents' needs were [receiving] our continuous service and support. We did community organising and counselling as residents had emotional disturbances on other issues relating to the renewal.

[Participant 5/UR/Incident G]

These two participants [5&6/UR] faced the reality that they could not withdraw from residents immediately until the end of the contract, both physically and psychologically, by only considering the agency's instruction because they

fully acknowledged residents' genuine mixed feelings. It was difficult for them to ignore residents' hopes and feelings about the team's staying with them. The two social workers thought they could not avoid providing tangible support to the residents relating to social actions. It was because on a practical level, since residents' welfare needs and their frustration about the team's failure to renew its contract could not be separated, it was not feasible for the workers to ignore residents' feelings and respond to their needs selectively:

My working partner and I thought we needed to [be] working together with our residents. Their needs at that time were not only our team's staying in serving them. They also needed our emotional support. When we provided emotional support to them, we could not avoid touching on our staying in the service.

[Participant 5 & 6/UR/Incident G]

In this dilemma, the two competing values were loyalty to residents and obedience to the employing agency. Both sides sounded reasonable, but it was difficult for workers to stand for either party.

### **7.2.3 General community work practice**

Apart from situations involving urgency for decision-making and undecidability, workers also undertook some normal community work interventions in a hidden manner. The following worker [10/BD] and her colleagues did not disclose to their supervisor about working with pressure

groups when handling cases. It was common that workers communicated with pressure groups regarding residents' specific situations for the group's information to advocate for residents; this was part of community work practices:

..some colleagues' cases were under the care of pressure groups... did we cooperate with pressure groups? We did when handling residents' cases but did not disclose it to our supervisor. Instead, we, six members, discussed these cases by ourselves. So we knew colleagues had some level of cooperation with pressure groups.

[Participant 10 /BD]

In another incident, the worker below [8/UR] had to hide her interventions at different levels, from training up and empowering residents to prepare them for facing social actions in the future. The worker had to do these hiddenly and could not show off in social actions for fear that the redevelopment operator, the funding body, would discover:

I participated in preparation work [of social actions] but did not show off with residents during actions. I needed to hide; otherwise, the operator identified me that I joined actions with residents.

[Participant 8 /UR]

Interestingly, the worker's [8/UR] supervisor was informed about one of the hidden actions and suggested the worker should do it cleverly so that her participation in social action should be reported to the supervisor in good time. In this case, the intervention was not hidden to the supervisor, only to the

funding body. Actually, the supervisor had to self-prepare to cope with the funding body's questioning if the action was discovered. In this sense, the supervisor understood that such action was hidden, and what he could do was to control the damage if discovered:

My team leader asked me [why I brought residents to court], and I replied to him, "Why not?" It was for their psychological preparation in case they had a similar experience in the future. I remembered that my senior manager had told me over the phone that it was not absolutely 'no', but I needed to inform him beforehand so he could answer the operator. My senior manager's message was that we needed to do it cleverly, but my team leader thought we had to do it very carefully and [this action] could not be known by the operator.

[Participant 8 /UR]

In another circumstance, the worker [8/UR] was determined to escort the resident involved in a radical social action with other campaigners in an eviction. In this case, the supervisor knew it could be hidden, and what he could do was deliberate with the worker about the professional ground in this critical environment. To a certain extent, this showed the supervisor's support to the worker:

Because you [the worker] need to avoid...simply because...you knew when we [workers] were doing organising work where residents stood up to voice out, they really needed social worker's backup when they were presenting in actions since they left their comfort zone, residents

were leaping out of their comfort zone, so social worker's accompanying was very important. However, we [workers] could not play this role openly!..... I remembered one of my cases where he [the resident] decided to stay in his home during the eviction, and I planned to stay with him. I remember my supervisor considered many reasons to explain why we were inside. Because that means we supported the resident! We needed to discuss this through several meetings to find an explanation for why I, a social worker, stayed with the resident. We wanted to let the operator understand we aimed to provide emotional support to the resident at that critical moment and prevent him from being provoked as some other concerned group members and activists would be with the residents too. We wanted the operator to understand our grounds for staying with the resident.

[Participant 8 /UR]

Needless to say, the agency's support to frontline workers through supervisors was vital in the secondary settings. The two examples of participants 8 and 10 above illustrated that ordinary community work interventions had to be done hiddenly. Unlike in the aforementioned cases, the worker below [5/UR] witnessed that openly employing a community work approach was allowed in her team. In addition, she [5/UR] understood that this was an exceptional situation because in other similar organisations, management support could not be taken for granted:

When joining this team, doing community work was my career objective. So, it did not make sense I did not commit it when I was in

the group. In addition, the working atmosphere and culture were important too. Workers' mutual communication was critical. Furthermore, honestly, our senior management had not stopped us. So why should we not do community work? Because I knew senior management of other organisations did not allow workers to do community work or do it in limited scopes. So, from my understanding, community organising was a method to fight for residents' welfare; why didn't we do it if the senior management did not stop us?

[Participant 5 /UR]

### **7.3 Aporias of practice**

Participants in this research were asked to share their experiences in handling dilemmas in practice. A phenomenon of taking hidden actions was found in most of the incidents subjectively perceived by workers as ethical dilemmas. Although participants' perceptions of dilemmas varied, all incidents they selected can be understood as ethically difficult situations without hesitation.

In considering what the prerequisite (condition) of taking hidden actions is, based on the data collected, I argue that the circumstances under which workers take their hidden actions are aporias of practice. Aporia is an Aristotelian concept about practice wisdom, which is believed to apply to all practical reasoning (Macklin & Whiteford, 2012). According to Kinsella and Pitman (2012a), aporias are unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainties in the contexts of professional practice, and there are "always moments of undecidability and decision, moments when one must act, even if the way forward is not clear, or—more radically—is uncertain"(Green, 2009, pp. 11-12).

As mentioned in section 7.2 of this chapter, workers took hidden actions at the following two moments:

1. Urgency for decision-making: When workers chose to take hidden actions, residents' welfare or interests were approaching a critical at-risk moment.
2. Undecidability: The dilemma was that the workers involved were in a deadlock between residents and the department, and they could not move on.

The first moment pinpoints situations in which workers' decisions must be made before their thinking is thoroughly developed within a limited time, whereas the second reflects the perplexity that workers face in moral deliberations. Obviously, workers encountered uncertainties when these circumstances appeared while tackling ethically difficult situations.

### **7.3.1 Connection between hidden actions and ethically difficult situations**

If aporia is assumed to be the condition of workers' taking hidden actions, unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainties should be developed on or before hidden actions are taken. In this sense, the connection between hidden actions and related dilemma situations, and how this connection works and interacts during workers' ethical decision-making, are significant for the analysis.

In incident C, where a social worker [3/BD] removed an official notice to avoid an elderly resident having emotional disturbance that, in turn, would affect his ill-health, the connection between the dilemma and the hidden action was straightforward – the hidden action is one of the choices the worker must make to address the dilemma concerned. If the worker allowed the resident to see that notice, the resident would probably be upset under her calculation, and his health condition would be adversely affected. Since she could not persuade the responsible officer to postpone issuing the notice and was not confident enough to intervene in the aftermath, she worked out a plan to remove the notice. As it was the worker's last resort, the choice in front of her was clear. Since the hidden action was one of the options for addressing the dilemma, whether the worker should take this hidden action was also an ethical decision indeed. Obviously, taking a hidden action by removing an official notice in this case was an unwelcome option because a professional is expected to be honest, while the action contradicted the department's interest.

On the other hand, in incidents A and G, there appeared a different relationship between hidden actions and dilemma situations. Workers [5&6/UR] in incident G faced a complicated problem. Their team lost its service contract in the middle of the redevelopment, which provoked residents' emotions; in turn, the residents initiated a series of social actions against the funding body to keep the team to serve them.

The complexity of this incident has different layers. First, if the workers [5&6/UR] supported the residents in whatever ways, the public would perceive



them as taking advantage of residents to change the tendering result. However, before the contract ended, they needed to serve the residents whose concerns inevitably touched on the team's termination; in other words, the workers [5&6/UR] practically could not avoid having a conflict of interest. In addition, they were touched by residents' giving back to them; if they were indifferent to residents' thoughts and actions during that frustrating period only to avoid a conflict of interest, the workers [5&6/UR] thought they, as social work trained community workers, were not professional enough as they could not view the case from residents' perspective.

The critical issue in incident G that pressured the workers [5&6/UR] was avoiding conflict of interest. Nevertheless, workers' actions to help residents during this period would be interpreted or misunderstood as having a conflict of interest that should have been avoided. Noteworthy, hidden actions taken in incident G were not a single action or behaviour as in incident C, where the worker [2/BD] removed an official notice. Instead, they were a chain of actions that workers [5&6/UR] took after making ethical decisions relating to the core dilemma in daily practice. In other words, the workers' [5&6/UR] decision to take those hidden actions or not was based on their judgement of how to resolve the overall dilemma - whether workers [5&6/UR] should stand on the residents' side or the organisation's side under that complicated context where the workers took into account their professional commitment and their empathy for residents with an intense relationship with them. This incident had lasted for several months, during which a basket of ethically difficult situations occurred. Although workers might make decisions case by

case, the critical point is that once they have confirmed their choice between the residents' side or the organisation's side, an overall dilemma, they would be directed towards how to respond in subsequent decisions.

A similar condition in which the worker [1/BD] needed to choose his positioning between residents and organisation occurred in incident A when the worker [1/BD] went through a process of supporting a group of residents facing an eviction operated by the department.

The officers expected the worker [1/BD] to assist those affected residents in handling their housing needs so that the eviction would be smoothly carried out. The worker [1/BD] knew the existing policies were insufficient to help affected residents fully meet their housing needs. They would only be arranged in a temporary shelter and interim housing farther from the urban area. Hence, the worker [1/BD] understood that what he should do was to help residents fight for a better arrangement. This worker [1/BD] was upset as he just followed the officers' instructions to comfort residents during the eviction. He understood he could not employ any community work approach to advocate for residents' welfare. The dilemma lasted for several months, from case referral to the end of the eviction; hidden actions took place that included worker's [1/BD] co-working with community workers of the concerned group who advocated for residents, channelling information about the eviction from officers to residents, and guiding them to stay at home during the eviction in ways that worked against officers' tactics. This worker [1/BD] chose not to support officers to guarantee a smooth eviction but stood on the

residents' side even though he could not fully perform all that a community worker can do.

The above incidents, A, C and G, show that the connection between hidden actions and dilemmas or ethically difficult situations is sometimes straightforward but sometimes complex. It's important to note that the unresolvable nature of dilemmas or ethically difficult situations is often a pre-existing condition before the hidden actions occur.

### **7.3.2 Dilemmas with remainder**

Aporias are unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainties in the context of professional practice, while uncertainties are likely contained in most ethically difficult situations that workers encounter. It is much easier to judge whether a situation has uncertainty than that is unresolvable. This is judged by the moral agent and is subjective. Accordingly, a dilemma is resolved when “a choice is made, and one alternative is judged to be less unwelcome than the other” (Banks & Williams, 2005, p. 1011). During the decision-making process, workers as moral agents may violate some moral principle or requirement; they may “feel remorse or regret at the decision made or action taken which is regarded as the remainder or residue left by the dilemma” (Banks & Williams, 2005, p. 1012). Hursthouse (1995, p. 619) thought remainder and residue are important ideas of an irresolvable dilemma – “feeling distressed or regret or remorse or guilt by recognising that some apology or restitution or compensation is called for after choosing one of the

evils, accordingly, dilemmas are only resolvable with (possible) remainders rather than completely solved”.

One of the sub-categories in this research is ‘experiencing negative emotions’ (see Chapter 5). This category is instrumental in identifying workers who, as moral agents, experience remaining effects after making their ethical decisions. These emotions were not only related to the workers themselves but also to their clients, stakeholders, and the incidents they encountered. Again, it is important to note that determining whether a dilemma is unresolvable is a subjective interpretation made by the worker before taking hidden actions. Although logically, whether a dilemma is resolvable can be determined after it has been settled, when workers make ethical decisions, they proactively anticipate whether the dilemma they will encounter will be resolved. Despite this subjectivity, the data provides clear examples of the residual effects of ethical decisions.

For example, in incident A, the worker [1/BD] had a self-blame when not helping residents fight for their rights when becoming homeless was the central residue. Although he chose to stand on the residents’ side, he could not contribute to the key issue, the housing need, that residents were encountering. This negative emotion multiplied when he found the difference for him compared with those community workers of the residents’ alliance – they could employ community work, but he could not.

On the other hand, in incident C, an obvious remainder was a strong sense of guilt since the worker [2/BD] evaluated that she could not prevent the resident

from moving into a new community in his old age. In this case, the hidden action was also one of the ethical choices in the dilemma.

Regarding the unusual action she took as a professional, her views during the interview were also inconsistent, which implied her regret of the action and can also be treated as a residue of her ethical choice. At first, she recalled she had not felt the action was illegal and was unsure if it was caused by her anger about the officer's refusal to postpone issuing the order. The only thing she confirmed is that the action was for the sake of the old man:

I didn't...I mean, what I had done was illegal...I didn't feel so.

I am sure I was too angry at that time.

I thought about illegal, no!

I did not think so. That what I had done was illegal...I did not think about it.

[Participant 2/BD/Incident C]

However, when I reflected to her about how strong her motivation was to help the resident, the worker responded emotionally:

[Crying]...not that I didn't think about it [if it is illegal]; it's because the old man stayed in the hospital before.

[Participant 2/BD/Incident C]

Eventually, she mentioned clearly that she would be responsible for her action even if she would be brought to court, implying that she admitted her action was illegal:

.....I have my working style, and I should say in this way, I am willing to bear the responsibility [of removing the official notice] because it was done by me, even though I would be brought to court ....

[Participant 2/BD/Incident C]

On the other hand, this worker's [2/BD] guilt was caused by her incapability to prevent the older man from leaving his original community. She struggled with guilt and helplessness, feeling responsible for the older man's situation. According to the worker [2/BD], one possible way to prevent this was to persuade the responsible officer to defer issuing an official order. Conversely, at the same time, the worker [2/BD] advised the older man to buy another property as his alternate residence in case he was forced to leave his original home. She had to set up different action plans to respond to the worst situation. The worker's [2/BD] passiveness and helplessness in working in this setting were unveiled by mapping these efforts. Her hidden action only served to avoid the older man's emotional disturbance. Her negative emotions after taking the hidden actions resulted from lacking a solid professional ground to back up herself and appeal for colleagues' understanding and support. Her ambivalence in interpreting the hidden action implied her inner contradiction of whether she had admitted any inappropriateness of removing an official notice.

## **7.4 Act for the good of clients**

According to the data, six of the ten participants in this study had direct experience of taking hidden actions. Since workers voluntarily took hidden actions, their judgement on whether to take them is crucial when investigating the causes of actions. Provided that aporia was the condition under which hidden actions were taken, workers' reasoning (cause) in using hidden actions to tackle unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainties was significant because it reflected the extent of and whether practitioners use phronesis (practical wisdom) to address the aporias. Phronesis is one of several 'intellectual virtues' in the Aristotelian scheme. And theoretically, there is a link between aporia and phronesis as follows:

1. "Phronesis implies ethics and involves deliberation that is based on values, concerned with practical judgement and informed by reflection. It is pragmatic, variable, context-dependent, and oriented toward action"(Kinsella & Pitman, 2012a, p. 2) .
2. "Phronesis has a significant place in everyday social practices of professional practitioners" (Stout, 1990).
3. "Phronesis recognises aporias and aims to act within uncertainty in a constructive manner and is commonly perceived as practical rationality or practical wisdom which put emphasis on the use of reason"(Kinsella & Pitman, 2012b, p. 165) .

### **7.4.1 The good intentions for clients**

Based on the collected data, most participants who took hidden actions were found to have good intentions for their clients, the residents. If workers use phronesis to deal with unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainties in practice, these good intentions may serve to visualise workers' use of phronesis, which is an elusive concept (Frank, 2012).

For example, the good intention of the residents of the below worker [9/BD] was to prevent residents from being homeless if the worker reported residents' illegal living conditions to her colleagues and supervisor. The worker [9/BD] did not provide any tangible service to the residents, except for paying a home visit, since this group of residents was out of the scope of her service at SST. In this case, the mistrust of her agency was a critical consideration for her decision. This was because her colleagues answered her straightforwardly that they would report this group of residents to the department, which they saw as their responsibility because they received the department's funding. The colleagues' response could be counted as self-limitation behaviour because they hoped to keep their good relationship with officers and to be perceived as a well-performing team, which they believed was beneficial to the later contract renewal:

They [the worker's colleagues] said: "You are operating SST, which means the department funds you and employs your SST, so SST should inform the department".



[Participant 9/BD/Incident P]

However, the worker [9/BD] was puzzled about how this self-limitation was constituted, including whether it arose from pressure from the department or was initiated by her colleagues and supervisor:

I still have a query [about how the self-limitation was formed] until now. I was not sure if the limitation came from the agency itself or how social workers perceived their SST. Or did the pressure come from the department?.....or did the agency and workers know that they could not go beyond the boundary? That was, I have not confirmed the answer until now. The conflict I faced at that time was owing to the agency's will to be very stable and safe, which has put the agency's relationship with the department higher than that with clients.

[Participant 9/BD/Incident P]

Therefore, 'preventing residents from being homeless' was the worker's [9/BD] good intention to avoid an anticipated unfavourable consequence. Obviously, the worker [9/BD] and her colleagues held the opposite goal – working for the residents' good or the good of the funding organisation. The use of reasons of the worker was based on a principle – putting the residents first:

I think what we did should have been to put residents or clients first. It is because I believe the basic principle was that service came first; if there was a conflict between the service and other things, I think, in most situations, [we] should put clients first.

[Participant 9/BD/Incident P]

What is meant by 'good' in BDSST was debatable and situated in nature. For example, preventing residents from being homeless was 'good' (from workers' perspective), whereas removing residents from an illegal residence was for their safety (from the department's perspective). However, provided that a resettlement policy and a decent interim housing arrangement were not in place, residents should be allowed to stay in their current unit without immediate building safety issues, which may not be wrong. Hence, when using practice wisdom, workers practising in community work secondary settings (CWSS) should equip themselves with a broader perspective and uphold social work values to reach a more substantial ethical decision.

Compared to the above incident regarding the worker-client relationship, the following worker [2/BD] undoubtedly had built up a more intense relationship with the client, who had been under her care for a long time. This participant's [2/BD] hidden action was severe and unusual in social work practice as it obviously violated specific rules, regulations and even laws. From the department's viewpoint, the action, if discovered, would break the trust of the worker since it would affect the enforcement action, and that could not be allowed by civil servants. This participant [2/BD] was very concerned with the older man's health. She was afraid he was too vulnerable to face the coming enforcement order issued by the department. Therefore, the only intention of taking a risk by removing the notice during her social work duty was to take care of the older man's health and for the sake of his welfare.

Apart from the knowledge of the older man's health condition, the worker understood the older man's subjective feeling about breaking the law – as an

obedient citizen, he was trapped by the ongoing changed building ordinances. The worker [2/BD] was truly worried that his emotional disturbance would trigger the older man's heart disease relapse. This vivid example connects good intention, morality, and action. The older man's ill health pushed the worker to take a high-risk action. This dilemma was between the client's welfare and the worker's conduct. If the worker emphasised principles of professional code of practice, she would not have taken her own risk; however, she eventually did it because she was concerned more about the consequences:

I knew if the notice was posted up and the old owner did have heart disease if he had seen this, and he thought he was a person who would never break the law. His flat was suddenly changed to be illegal after living there for an extended period.

[Participant 2/BD/ Incident C]

The good intention of the above case arose from the worker's pity for the elderly resident, while in the following case [incident G], namely the 'Chun Tin incident', the two workers' [5&6/UR] commitment to residents was relatively deep. This arose because their worker-client relationship was built by a reciprocal experience in fighting for a fair compensation package for residents, through which residents were empowered; these residents, in return, strove for the team's continuous service to them. Undoubtedly, the workers' good intention reflected their affection for residents and moral responsibility to them:

It was very complex as many values were upheld, including conflict of interest and righteousness, which were contradicted. Righteousness means...we were supported by the residents oppositely. We could not use 'conflict of interest' as an excuse to do nothing and be indifferent..... in fact, I need to weigh one thing that was more important than 'conflict of interest': that's a kind of friendship we felt from residents, we should help and support them if the situation were allowed....it was important if we had walked together with residents in the process.

[Participant 6/UR/Incident G]

The above participant 6 identified righteousness as being higher than avoiding a conflict of interest. 'Righteousness' is translated from the worker's wording in Cantonese. The meaning is about 'friendship' among 'brotherhood', in the sense that the workers should be loyal to the residents who have a strong tie of a mutual relationship built through walking together to fight for a fair compensation package even though both workers and residents understood there was a potential risk that the team may lose the upcoming service contract:

In fact, it was not me to be fearful about having opposite views with the operator, but the residents. I don't know why there was not only one resident, but several residents always asked me and my working partner if we were afraid of being revenged. At that time, we did not consider this because the compensation package was literally unfair, so we needed to tackle it. At the same time, all of you [the residents]

had the same view [that the compensation package was unfair].  
Therefore, residents accepted that we were walking together.....

[Participant 5/UR/Incident G]

Hence, residents' standing up for workers [5&6/UR] by taking social actions against the funding body was their thanksgiving for workers' dedication. When the team lost their contract, workers [5&6/UR] were not indifferent to residents' 'help' (through their social actions against the funding body). Besides, the residents were reluctant to change social workers who have grasped their cases well and already developed a trusting worker-client relationship with them. As such, workers' good intentions in this incident had a relational aspect where they did not want to disappoint residents for their kindness and effort in standing up for the team:

I do not know. Such friendship and separation were built up by emotional bonding between workers and clients through engagement with each other; they would not come back to approach us if no bonding existed. You could see that in another project with a similar situation, residents' responses were different.

[Participant 6/UR/Incident G]

Finally, at the practical level, the workers [5&6/UR] understood that until the contract had ended, they had a responsibility to help residents solve their problems, and it was inevitable for them to touch on residents' thoughts and feelings about the team's termination. Hence, the workers [5&6/UR] thought

they should not use ‘avoiding a conflict of interest’ as an excuse not to care for residents’ needs in this complex situation.

As mentioned, using a community work approach in the secondary settings was another hidden action some workers took. The following worker [8/UR] had done this in her team, where most members were former caseworkers who did not share the community work ideology. The good intention of this worker [8/UR] in using a community work approach has two meanings. Firstly, she believed organising residents to fight for a fairer compensation package or policies could defend them against the operator’s lobbying tactics with individual residents since they could be organised to strengthen their structural mindset. The second good intention involved addressing whether residents could settle down under the urban redevelopment process:

I think residents were suffering from disequilibrium under urban development. They were so confused, like floating in the ocean. I understand that ‘settling down’ is another beginning of their life with peace. Those domestic owners could buy a new home they love or be allocated a public housing unit. For shop owners, ‘settle down’ means either continuing their original business or searching for another career.

[Participant 8/UR]

This good intention was developed by the worker’s [8/UR] direct contact with residents with different levels of vulnerability. She used ‘floating’ to describe the residents’ psychological state, reflecting the ups and downs of residents’ emotional state relating to the uncertainty during the redevelopment. For

example, some shop owners even became bankrupt during the redevelopment process as their businesses were affected by the physical change of the development zone:

Also, I could see residents' frustration because some needed to face court actions. And then, I found some shop owners had financial problems as their shop business worsened. Actually, I supported some residents going through bankruptcy.....I saw they suffered too much but could not solve their problems. Then, they would be angrier; in turn, they were reluctant to compromise with the operator on the compensation amount, and their relationship with the operator was worse...

[Participant 8/UR]

In incident A, the participant [1/BD] below was deeply committed to supporting the residents facing eviction despite his pessimism about the alliance's action. He found himself in a difficult situation when he had to disclose the department's action plan, a decision he believed was unethical:

However, the alliance mostly would fail. Then, we needed to face the immediate need for kaifongs, which was removal. Kaifongs were reluctant to be removed from their rooftop flats, while officers wanted to proceed with eviction. We know that officers are now doing many tricky things, but we cannot stop this. Still, there are many contradictions.

[Participant 1/BD/Incident A]

Is there any problem with my professional ethics? I do not know how to answer this question. I disclosed something to kaifongs that I heard from BD. It should have been kept confidential, but I broke it. Of course, if I perceive it from kaifongs' perspective, that is not harmful.

[Participant 1/ BD/Incident A]

His good intentions were multi-layered, ultimately driven by his commitment to prevent residents from becoming homeless. During the eviction, he took measures to protect the residents from being trapped by the officers emptying their units. As he stated, he was in a difficult situation, unable to gain support from both sides (the residents and the officers) simultaneously:

Another contradiction is that officers expect you to give a hand in the eviction, but we have to do something to stop or postpone the eviction. On the one hand, we thought it was not easy for officers to proceed with the eviction as many people, i.e., residents, were there. However, on the other hand, officers could mislead residents to leave the flat and do so. We then needed to do some tricky things “under the table” to block the eviction. We were in a very contradicting and embarrassing position where we wanted to support residents, but we could not behave openly because we needed to fulfil what officers expected us to do.

[Participant 1/BD/Incident A]



### **7.4.2 Thinking critically and practically**

Although workers' good intentions for residents' welfare as the cause of their hidden actions dominated their decision-making, they must consider other environmental factors when implementing their action plans. That is to say, apart from considering residents' good, the use of reason by workers in tackling dilemmas involved them thinking critically and practically, which are features of the virtue of phronesis (Kemmis, 2012). For example, in incident A, where a worker [1/BD] supported residents undergoing an eviction, he showed how he made a judgement alongside other practical concerns. He had to analyse specific contexts and the environment and take proper and careful actions:

We had done something that officers could not know. It was pretty tricky yet not too special, and we told residents not to leave their units no matter what happened. It was so simple! It was because officers had to force residents to move out if they did not go out. As we foresaw, the workforce police was too small to take such action. Besides, since officers told us to inform residents to conduct a group meeting in an open area, they planned that if residents went out, they could knock on their units and not allow residents to return later. That is why we taught residents to go out under no circumstance.

[Participant 1/BD/Incident A]

In order to protect residents from being trapped by officers, the above worker [1/BD] taught residents to stay in their homes. He thought it was the best action for both sides to avoid further conflict. At the same time, the eviction

would probably be deferred. Having obtained up-to-date information from officers, this participant [1/BD] felt confident that his suggestion to residents was safe enough. The worker [1/BD] described hidden actions as 'tricky', in the sense that on the one hand, he heard about officers' tactics of emptying residents' homes, while he reminded residents not to go outside on the other. He explicitly addressed an ethical issue he faced when taking hidden actions, mainly when he was in a difficult situation that required him to behave in an ethical manner. In facing this ethically difficult situation, this participant [1/BD] made an effort to resolve it pragmatically. He recognised contradictory expectations of both sides and eventually facilitated the deferral of eviction as a short-term resolution of the dilemma. The worker [1/BD] confessed that he was unethical as he used tricky ways. This dual role did produce an inner conflict for the worker [1/BD]. On the one hand, he had a sense of self-depreciation as he was not ethical enough. Ironically, he used an unethical way to work for clients. On the other hand, while facing the officer, he needed to behave professionally again.

Yes, there were many, really many judgements. The first one was what you mentioned before, i.e., should officers proceed with eviction under that circumstance? I judged that residents would not surrender. So, two consequences would follow: either residents would be forced to leave their flats, or the eviction would be deferred. I could tell every person you could try to defer; eventually, they decided to postpone, which means they wanted to do so. This was related to my first

judgement that it was not humanistic to launch eviction at that moment.

[Participant 1/BD/Incident A]

To think practically, the worker [1/BD] anticipated that it would be the best result if the eviction should be deferred. This was because residents' determination to stay in their homes was firm while officers' capacity was too weak to vacate residents' homes. In addition, the worker [1/BD] understood that the prevailing re-settlement policies were not good enough to secure a fair arrangement for residents; that meant he did not allow himself to put residents in a disadvantaged condition. Therefore, after realising officers planned to trap residents into leaving their unit, the worker [1/BD] had to teach residents to stay home, and officers could do nothing under their limitations. This example illustrates the complicated context where the worker [1/BD] thinks critically and practically when implementing his ethical decisions. On the other hand, in incident G, the workers [5&6/UR] asked themselves a critical and practical question: How front should they stand in the action? Although they had decided to stand on the residents' side, they needed to act prudently to avoid the negative impact of the overall situation. Throughout the ethical decision-making process, the connection between workers' thoughts and actions was modified on an ongoing basis:

...I kept on thinking about how front I should stand in this action. This was all of the tension referred to, considered in every step and issue, for instance.....supporting program materials, yet we dared not to

deliver it directly from our office; we placed it first in one resident's home; this represented one kind of tension.

[Participant 6/UR/Incident G]

### **7.4.3 Taking morally committed actions**

Kemmis (2012, p. 156) states, "The purpose of phronetic action has ethical and moral overtones; it is the kind of knowledge that will prove us against uncertainty and dread – asking for wisdom. When we have phronesis, we are thus prepared to take moral responsibility for our actions and the consequences that follow from them. The virtue of phronesis is thus a willingness to stand behind our actions".

To what extent were participants aware of such moral responsibility when tackling ethically difficult situations, and how did they interpret and face it? In incident B, the worker [1/BD] encountered an embarrassing and challenging positioning when performing his SST worker's duty. When he handled a case referral from officers, he was expected to comfort a resident who would complain to the department about an administrative mistake. This worker [1/BD] had to employ another tricky way in the helping process in order not to affect the working relationship with the department:

Overall, we were in a very embarrassing position. We must not let people [officers] know I escorted the resident to make a complaint to the department. This is not acceptable from their [officers'] viewpoint. This was a contradicted situation.

[Participant 1/BD/Incident B]

Now you escorted the resident, which means you [social service team worker] took part in the complaining process. However, from my viewpoint, the inner one, I think I can resolve this dilemma. It is because I need not consider the assignment referred to by the department.

[Participant 1/BD/Incident B]

Obviously, this participant [1/BD] understood the hidden action he took in the helping process. He described how the situation involved was embarrassing. However, he felt comfortable as these actions were taken from the residents' perspective, though he technically knew he could not record all he had done, implying the hidden nature of these incidents. He clearly understood the consequences if the officer discovered this action.

In another complex incident, the following worker [6/UR] worked with residents to fight for their rights against the redevelopment policy. Even though he was aware of the risk of losing a future service contract, he kept doing that social action as his primary concern was residents' welfare:

At that time, we thought the fear of 'revenge' [by some authority to make the team's service contract not be re-secured] was not our concern. That was an unfair compensation policy indeed, and we needed to handle residents who had the same perspective; some residents perceived us as 'walking together with them', and some worried if we would be 'revenged' as we were so radical....yet the new

tender had not been announced at that time, so they worried us...however, we said we needed to put residents at the priority.

[Participant 6/UR]

In this case, the worker's action [6/UR] might lose his team's service contract, whereas he would sacrifice residents' welfare if he did not act. His moral consideration of advocacy work was generated before the Chun Tin Incident. His worry about the consequence of working against the operator related to a key issue in CWSS concerning whether advocacy work harmed the team's prospects. Both workers [5&6/UR] and residents had this worry. This action happened after the Urban Renewal Strategy was reviewed, establishing the Urban Renewal Fund (URF) and serving as a 'firewall' between the social service teams and the Urban Renewal Authority (URA). Workers' [5&6/UR] and residents' worry implied they could not trust the new funding mechanism without hesitation. Workers' choices to walk with residents openly in fighting for their welfare proved their willingness to take up the moral responsibility and consequences, rejecting the moral compromise that would be involved by avoiding doing advocacy work.

As a matter of fact, the workers' team could not secure their later service contract being renewed even though they met service output/outcomes and built trust with residents. Noteworthy, the redevelopment project concerned was not ended, and changing a social service team during the redevelopment was not expected based on this worker's knowledge:

I did not worry about our contract [of being not renewed] as there was no previous case that the team [social service team] would be changed in the middle of renewal. Also, we performed excellently, and no complaints were received; why were we replaced?

[Participant 5/UR]

Workers' baseline regarding whether they employed a community work approach in this setting varied. Some workers perceived it was not permitted, whereas the other workers would allow themselves to uphold the community work values openly. In incident G, the two workers [5&6/UR] were committed to employing a community work approach in daily practice, including advocacy work, and they had the courage to take up moral responsibility. These two workers [Participants 5 & 6], if they supported residents' self-initiated social actions against the funding body, would be treated as having a conflict of interest. This was another moral responsibility, as they would be blamed for taking advantage of residents' support to change the tendering result. This incident illustrated how the workers were pushed into a corner where aporias of practice emerged and where they had to use phronesis to get rid of the perplexity. In other words, aporias of practice were inevitable in professional practice; it was only a matter of timing.

Another moral implication of phronesis is that workers reject moral compromise in practice, particularly in the external goods closely linked to the power relationship in this setting (Frank, 2012).

The following participant [9/BD] thought her colleagues maintained a too-close relationship with officers that went beyond an appropriate boundary:

For example, a senior officer invited SST workers to have lunch, and I knew some colleagues would have gathered with officers after working hours. That kind of relationship, I do not think it is necessary. I do not think we need to be opposite to each other since we need to cooperate to some extent; I think we need to set a boundary in some areas.

[Participant 9/BD]

Also, those social relationships extended to a working-level meeting where the social worker and their supervisor sought to please the chairperson [a senior officer]:

... We had a regular meeting with officers. Yet, we only spent 15 minutes on official matters over a two-hour meeting; the rest of the time was just casual conversation, for example, “How about your children?”, “How about your show?”, that is not related to work. At that time, my supervisor also presented in those meetings; he might have felt my attitude during the meeting; he thought I should be more related to them. He thought I should be more involved in that kind of conversation.

[Participant 9/BD]

One possible reason for such phenomena is that the supervisor wanted to maintain a good and harmonious relationship with officers, as the supervisor thought it is beneficial to their future renewal of service contract:



I think they could not make officers unhappy. As we need to renew the service contract, if I were them, I would think it would not be good to make officers unhappy.

[Participant 9/BD]

This worker's experience [9/BD] strongly contrasts with incident G, where workers [5&6/UR] sacrificed the team's service contract to advocate for residents' welfare. The sustainability of community work projects solely depended on whether a service contract could be renewed. The contract of social service teams was renewed regularly every two years through open bidding. The teams received a regular performance report from the funding body rated by co-working officers; the criterion in this report and other service output agreed in the contract became external goods recognised by the funding body.

In incident Q, the focus on rejecting moral compromise was on how workers maintained an appropriate interpersonal relationship with officers and the funding body's representatives – that could facilitate cooperation with each other and avoid sacrificing clients' welfare because of such interpersonal relationships. This participant [9/BD] understood that a social relationship or friendship would be built if workers maintained frequent social gatherings with officers. In a Chinese society where the relationship was emphasised, it was difficult for workers to be assertive to officers for the good of residents. Hence, this participant [9/BD] contended that workers should set clear interpersonal boundaries with officers.

On the other hand, social workers who served in social service teams in secondary settings were always expected to help the funding bodies attain their organisational goals. Workers were in a dilemma when those goals contradicted the client's interest. In this incident [B], the worker [1/BD] was expected by the referral officer to stop a resident from making a complaint to the department:

In reality, some officers expected us to stop when something happened, such as residents complaining to them. Some officers expected us to serve as a buffer in trouble matters. I sometimes wondered if it was reasonable when I served as a buffer. I think it would be reasonable if officers forced residents to remove an illegal part of the building. Residents should remove it under some circumstances, as it is unlawful.

[Participant 1/BD/Incident B]

In handling this case, the worker [1/BD] did not sacrifice the resident's right to express his grievances by making a complaint. This participant [1/BD] was not affected by the officer's expectations of him. Eventually, the client made his decision to complain to the department. In evaluating this case, this participant [1/BD] questioned the appropriateness of serving as a buffer expected by the officers, although he agreed to support officers in urging clients to comply with building orders for safety reasons:

To me, I did a tricky thing. I analysed with the resident to see the pros and cons of making a complaint to the department. Finally, the resident

decided to complain, and I accompanied him. Of course, this was a secret. The department expected us to comfort the resident, but we did oppositely.

[Participant 1/BD/Incident B]

## **7.5 Emotional distress and low professional identity**

Based on the above analysis of the causes of workers' hidden actions in practice, we can see that workers' good intentions for residents were the leading cause of their actions. At the same time, the aporia of practice was the condition under which hidden actions occur. Workers have taken two types of hidden actions. On the one hand, they made a specific intervention to address ethically difficult situations; on the other, the community work approach was employed in practice but in a hidden manner. The consequences of taking these hidden actions were directly connected with the types of actions taken.

The research findings highlight the prevalence of negative emotions among workers in ethically difficult situations. As detailed in section 5.6.1 of chapter 5, addressing ethically difficult situations is one of the three primary sources of these negative emotions. Furthermore, section 7.3.2 of this chapter reveals that workers often experience negative emotions after handling ethically difficult situations, providing evidence that these dilemmas are unresolvable.

The second consequence was related to the weak legitimation of the community work approach, which was pointed out in section 6.4 of chapter 6; it was perceived as the cause of workers being ambivalent in performing their

professional identity, particularly when selecting their intervention method and choosing whether they should employ the community work approach. It can be seen that the funding bodies had yet to perceive the social work team as a community work team since their establishment; no indicators of the service output and outcomes were of this nature. This lack of recognition of the community work techniques by funding bodies frustrated the workers. Funding bodies engaged the social work profession to assist in achieving their organisational goals. In this sense, the community work techniques were outside the skillset recognised by the funding bodies. Although workers tried to employ the approach in practice as a social object, their way of using it in a hidden manner helped nothing to raise its legitimacy.

According to Johnson et al. (2006), there are four stages in legitimating new objects: innovation, local validation, diffusion, and general validation; community work cannot go through even the first two stages. Social innovation is created to address some needs at the local level of actors. The social service teams were established to help fund organisations to reach their organisational goals in building safety and urban redevelopment landscapes. However, the object which obtained legitimacy was the social service teams rather than the community work approach.

Although social work should cover community work in the Hong Kong context, even without considering it as a social innovation, where workers only employed this approach in a hidden manner, it did not help enhance its legitimacy. This was because local actors, the workers, could not construe the community work approach as being in harmony with and linked to the

existing widely accepted cultural framework in the funding organisations or the teams. The funding organisations perceived the approach as being different from their organisational goals. In contrast, the workers were acutely aware of the contrasting goals between funders and residents, which made them ambivalent about using the approach. Therefore, although at the local level where the innovation is initiated, actors could not justify this link and failed to acquire local consensus; as a result, the innovation of the community work approach, even existing, could not acquire local validation.

## **7.6 Reflection, judgement and phronetic action**

According to Glazer's Six C's theoretical coding family, contingencies affect the direction of variables that generate categories, which, in turn, entail the consequences of such categories (Chenitz, 1986; Glaser, 1978). In this sense, workers might not take hidden actions or hidden actions with good phronetic quality despite having good intentions for clients. As mentioned, phronesis recognises aporias, and practitioners took action to address particular uncertainty or unresolvable dilemmas involving reflection and making judgements. Phronetic quality means how practitioners might orient such judgements in the direction of phronesis based on the grounds on which they make judgements (Kinsella, 2012). On the other hand, not all hidden actions negatively impacted workers' professional identity and emotions. Based on the data collected, the two contingencies of 'taking hidden actions in practice' are as follows:

1. Phronetic quality of workers' ethical judgement—reflection shapes action through workers' judgement (Kinsella, 2012). To what extent a phronetic quality informs workers' actions and judgements is one of the contingencies that affect workers' emotional response and self-perception of professional identity after taking hidden actions in practice.
2. Workers' reflexivity identified in their theories of practice — provided that a worker has good intentions for residents, their theory of practice determines whether they would carry out hidden actions and the quality of the actions.

### **7.6.1 Phronetic quality of judgement**

Professional practice is an interpretive practice that is “centrally concerned with how practitioners make judgements” (Kinsella, 2012, p. 47). Not every worker who took hidden actions in practice experiences negative emotions; the degree to which they did was affected by how good their ethical judgement against the ethically difficult situations was – this was the phronetic quality of their judgement. The relationship between phronetic quality and professional practice relates to the latter's interpretive nature. Schon (1987) first suggested three phronetic qualities, namely pragmatic usefulness, persuasiveness and aesthetic appeal, in the sense that right interpretations have the power to persuade grounded in their aesthetic appeal. Practitioners may also “acquire pragmatic usefulness, grounded in the expectation that they will lead to additional clarifying clinical material” (Schon, 1987, p. 229). Kinsella (2012)

proposed three further qualities for professional judgement - ethical imperatives, dialogic intersubjectivity, and transformative potential - which she believed were worth considering in searching for engaging phronesis, which refers to the active and participatory nature of ethical judgement, achieved through wise judgements in practice.

In incident G, despite the workers [5&6/UR] regretting their inability to serve the residents continuously, they did not experience guilt or a diminished professional identity as in two other incidents [Participant 2/BD/Incident C] and [Participant 1/BD/Incident A]. This was because the two workers [5&6/UR] in incident G consistently addressed residents' thoughts and feelings during difficult times, rather than using 'conflicts of interest' as a reason to distance themselves. Their unwavering commitment to addressing residents' needs and concerns during challenging times was a testament to their good intentions and phronetic action.

The mindset behind the workers' [5&6/UR] choice was to 'put clients first'. According to Kinsella (2012), many decisions faced by practitioners are infused with ethical concerns; these are often referred to as 'indeterminate decisions'. These are situations where the 'right' course of action is not immediately clear, and ethical imperatives become a criterion for considering practitioners' practice reflection on decision-making. To make judgments under uncertainty, these two workers' framing that perceived residents' needs as the forefront in this circumstance was shown. Obviously, the weight of ethical concern was identified in workers' [5&6/UR] interpretation of this situation and its overall picture because compared to their employing

organisation's instruction of avoiding conflict of interest and possible public perception of their taking advantage of residents' support, they chose not to be indifferent to residents' needs. Additionally, their interpretation was persuasive from a social work perspective because the workers did not compromise their practice to prioritise an organisational concern. Their judgement showed persuasiveness within the disciplinary community and the practice context (Kinsella, 2012). In this incident G, the persuasiveness concerning the course of action a practitioner chooses (for example, to 'put clients first') was assessed in light of their reflections within a specific context (urban redevelopment context) and a particular disciplinary community (community work). First, some residents and workers in the field perceived workers' advocacy work as being carried out earlier before the tendering exercise that pushed the operator to change its compensation policy to the residents concerned; they associated this result with the team's latter failure of contract renewal, interpreting this as being that the team had sacrificed its contract for the sake of residents' interest. Besides, although there was no evidence that anything went wrong in the vetting process, both workers of other URSSTs and residents questioned the unusual tendering result. Based on this interpretation, fellow workers in the field more or less understood workers' support for residents' social action in such an embarrassing situation where workers [5&6/UR] had to balance the interests of both residents and their employing organisation.

Under the workers' [5&6/UR] employing agency's discourse about 'avoiding conflict of interest', they were instructed to focus on the handover work and



terminate their worker-client relationship for the rest of the contractual period. The critical contrast in front of workers [5&6/UR] was seen as a tension between putting residents and organisations first. This tension instead highlighted an artistic facet of this dilemma in the sense that workers positioned themselves at an appropriate point where they made interventions carefully towards their intervention goals without triggering stakeholders' nerves. The aesthetic appeal, as proposed by Kinsella (2012), serves as a way of considering the experience of practice itself, in the sense that successful practice may be conceived of as an art form; "Such a conception recognises more than instrumentalist and efficiency-based views of the practice and includes realms outside traditional epistemic lines" (Kinsella, 2012, p. 48). In this incident [G], the workers [5&6/UR] kept evaluating the incident development and adjusted their degree of supporting residents. Overall, they could maintain a fair and reasonable relationship with all stakeholders with opposite interests while making an effort to avoid embarrassing their serving organisation. They also framed residents' growth in being empowered in advocacy work and the trustful relationship they built as key features of the incident. That is to say, with a high-level objective to enhance residents' growth, workers intervened by making an ongoing assessment of the overall dynamics and resolving problems by balancing stakeholders' interests and not giving up workers' work values and principles. With these phronetic qualities (persuasiveness and aesthetic appeal), workers perceived their actions as morally right and technically workable. As a result, their

professional identity and emotions were not adversely affected by the hidden actions they took.

In contrast, workers [2/BD] in incident C and worker [1/BD] in incident A felt both guilty and shameful after taking hidden actions, which reflected a difference in the phronetic quality of their ethical judgement.

In incident C, a lack of persuasiveness in the worker's [2/BD] hidden action (removing an official notice) is apparent since this was not an action that a professional social worker would do. This action did not show a commitment to professionalism regarding worker's [2/BD] credibility and use of professional knowledge –removing an official notice and preventing people concerned from reading the message is not correct and might be illegal to a certain extent; no code of practice would allow a professional social worker to commit this act. Furthermore, justifying this action by saying it is 'the last resort' is not convincing; the worker [2/BD] might have had the wisdom to identify a cleverer option. For example, if she asked the older person's son to receive the notice and then informed the older person about its contents at a later appropriate moment, the nature of this action was different – workers [2/BD] only handed over the notice to the resident's relative rather than destroying it. Furthermore, the practical use of this action was also questioned; another quality called pragmatic usefulness refers to the idea of practice fit or viability within the practitioner's experiential world (Kinsella, 2012).

In addition, dialogic intersubjectivity, another phronetic quality, was not performed well in incident C concerning the participant [2/BD]; accordingly,

“phronetic judgements recognise the sociality of consciousness, such that reflection is viewed as an individual and a social process, considered in light of both individual and collective thought”(Kinsella, 2012, p. 49). According to the worker[2/BD], she did not discuss her plan with her colleagues, not to mention her actions with her supervisor, because she was aware of the unusualness. Therefore, there was no room for her plan to be deliberated and negotiated with her colleagues. This judgement was only the worker’s [2/BD] individual thought from her perspective that the extent to which the dialogue nature of interpretation was not acknowledged and the extent to which ‘others’ versions of reality were not given a hearing. Moreover, if her action was discovered, to a certain extent, there might be negative impacts on all these parties (workers’ colleagues, supervisors and co-working officers in the department) regarding their reputation and the governance of the organisations. Finally, an ethical imperative was not found in this incident.

Similarly, in incident A, there appeared to be a neglect of ethical imperatives because although the worker [1/BD] was aware of using community work to fight for residents’ rights, in the beginning, he was only aware of providing residents with tangible support and neglected whether there was room to advocate for residents. The participant [1/BD] was aware of ethical issues relating to the incident. However, his delayed self-reflection led him to see what he did not and could not do – advocate for residents. This was a matter of the timing of making reflection. This was a reality that he could not change what had happened. Although he wanted to behave like an honest community worker, the best he could do was cooperate with other community workers in

the residents' alliance. In addition, through working with the concerned group, he found other community workers could do organising work, which mirrored the dark side of his professional life; in turn, he felt shame.

### **7.6.2 Practitioners' theory of practice**

As depicted in the above section, the phronetic quality of workers' moral judgement was reflected by their phronetic action, a product of workers' ethical decision-making in tackling dilemmas. It can be seen that not all workers took hidden actions resulting from negatively impacting their professional identity and emotions.

In exploring the contingency, I also question whether hidden action is an inevitable outcome of workers' good intentions for residents under respective circumstances. I argue that workers' reflectivity identified in their theory of practice is another influencing variable that converts workers' good intentions into specific hidden actions with good phronetic quality.

Phronesis means practical wisdom. As Kinsella and Pitman (2012a, p. 4) state: "practical wisdom requires discernment and implies reflection". In other words, phronesis emphasises reflection through which to inform practitioner's wise action in variable practice contexts where aporias of practice exist.

Sandywell (1996) imagines a continuum between pre-reflective, reflective, and reflexive experience. This interminable dialogue between different dimensions within a continuum of reflection is presented as a central

underpinning of how we might think of reflection as important for practical wisdom (phronesis) in professional life.

### ***Intentional reflection***

According to the collected data, workers had many opportunities to reflect when tackling ethically difficult situations in practice. Intentional and embodied reflection are two main types of reflection they used.

Intentional reflection is described by Dewey (1933, quoted in Kinsella and Pitman, 2012, p.38) as a way to “convert action that is merely appetitive, blind and impulsive into intelligent action”. Intentional reflection can occur within a short and limited time. The worker [10/BD] in this case [incident R] was informed about the surprising joint visit when she gathered with officers outside the resident’s home. She only had several minutes to analyse what was happening and what reaction she would make. The crucial consideration was whether she should allow all other officers to enter the resident’s home and what she should say to the resident. She even considered if she violated any social work values – the resident was not informed about the nature of the change of the home visit and did not give consent to the worker. Therefore, the worker [10/BD] might be accused of not protecting the client’s rights. The worker even had to make a reflection on herself, the resident and the engineer involved on what and how she could do and say to these parties to control the damage of such a sudden visit:

I was informed about the surprise visit when I gathered with officers outside the resident’s home in the lift lobby. I only had several minutes

to think about my reaction; for example, how could I remind them? At that time, I could not stop them. I just had several minutes. I needed to guess what the resident would think. Would the resident complain to me? And what would my working relationship with officers be?

[Participant 10/BD/Incident R]

After an engineer hijacked a planned joint home visit as an opportunity to enter a resident's home to conduct some initial inspections for the upcoming eviction, the worker [10/BD] was angry. She stopped and thought, eventually complaining to the engineer by emailing him. By the workers' [10/BD] calculation, this was an appropriate way to channel her concern to the engineer because she could educate him on the importance of trust between social workers and their clients and ventilate her bad emotions properly:

When this incident happened, I needed to explain it to the resident and give feedback to the department. During the process, I analysed the overall situation and found the engineer, like some other officers, seldom approached social workers. Before I decided to give feedback by email, I had considered whether this method could bring effective communication or future working relationships with officers.

[Participant 10/BD/Incident R]

In this example, the worker's [10/BD] anger, reflected upon in the aftermath of the unexpected inspection, was converted into a proper way to pursue practical cooperation with the officer in the future.

Schon (1983) describes reflective practice as a dialectic process in which thought and action are integrally linked. While supporting residents in preparing for an upcoming eviction enforced by the department, the following worker [1/BD] showed another instance of using intentional reflection. He had to review the thoughts and feelings of all residents, officers, and community workers of the alliance and then make judgments throughout ongoing changing situations. His reflection occurred during and after practices. He judged that there was no room for both residents and officers to compromise - residents refused to move out, whereas officers were determined to launch an eviction as scheduled:

No, it [the dilemma] was not resolved, unable to resolve. Now, it is like we borrow the alliance's hand to do something. A CD worker should have done this work. As a CD worker, you should do this; it is not reasonable if you do not help residents fight for their rights. All we know the housed centre is only a last resort, but not a favourable environment for families. Honestly speaking, I hold the same standpoint. However, the advocacy work is undertaken by the alliance.

[Participant 1/BD/Incident A]

Meanwhile, his self-reflection reminded him that he had a moral responsibility to help residents striving for a structural change of the prevailing re-settlement policy as a community development worker. Having accepted the reality that he could not do this advocacy work owing to his role as an SST worker, he eventually did it by the alliance's hand by keeping them updated on the progress and thoughts of the responsible officers:

Sometimes, I self-reflect on why I only engaged residents in handling removal and searching for social resources instead of thinking about fighting for policy improvement; it is because the current housing policy does not favour people living in illegal rooftop flats.

[Participant 1/BD/Incident A]

### ***Embodied reflection***

On the other hand, embodied reflection, which arises in the practitioner's experience as revealed in action, is found in this participant's case [9/BD/Incident P] relating to her perception of a home visit in practice. She had developed a tacit knowledge of home visits through her past experience working in a neighbourhood scheme. She discovered some advantages of home visits brought to practice, such as enhancing her understanding of residents, building rapport, and being more empathetic when conducting an assessment. Paying regular home visits to a group of residents who were not her service target, which was the hidden intervention in this case, through building up knowledge about home visiting, this participant [9/BD] linked it with those good intentions for the residents. According to Argyris and Schon (1992), tacit knowledge is beneficial for understanding theories-in-use. Each practitioner develops a theory of practice, whether or not he or she is aware of it. These theories include workers' explicit knowledge and theories-in-use, also termed 'know-how', which workers may not be aware of and revealed by behaviours. The theories-in-use reflect assumptions about their 'self, others, and the environment'. This participant [9/BD] had developed her theory of



practice of making use of home visits in community work to engage residents she served, and this theory is composed of explicit knowledge of what she was able to say:

When I worked in NLCDP [Neighbourhood Level Community Development Project], I continued to visit residents in the community, always paying home visits to them. I liked the feeling of relating to residents in the community. ....I liked the setting of a home visit to contact residents. So, I thought I would do more of this kind of work.

[Participant 9/BD/Incident P]

Home visit...the feeling...I thought it was very close to residents. In opposite to their self-approach to the centre, we are going into their life. They might not tell you [worker] many when home visit, but you could observe and feel, to sense what residents were. You would feel so close to residents, and you could imagine what they were facing. And, when a resident allows you to go into his/her home, you would think he/she trusted you or accepted you to approach him/her closer; that's a good feeling.

[Participant 9/BD/Incident P]

The above incident illustrated one example of a worker's theory of practice, which influenced a specific intervention area – using home visits to engage residents in service. The connection between workers' reflection and practice was also identified. First, through reflection, she built up a specific theory of

home visits. Second, through further reflection on the specific situation, she decided to keep paying home visits to a group of out-of-bounds residents.

Paying attention to a broader context under which hidden actions took place, I try to articulate workers' theories of practice, which influenced their attitude and mindset, in turn, the general inclination of practising in the community work secondary settings relating to people and the environment. This is because the theories in use reflect their assumptions about self, others, and the environment. These assumptions were made through workers' reflection after digesting and consolidating their experiences in professional life under the secondary settings. In this sense, these theories of practice served to guide workers' overall practice in the settings.

The analysis will be made regarding the two types of hidden actions: 1) employing a community work approach in the settings and 2) specific hidden actions taken by workers.

Participants 5/UR, 6/UR, and 8/UR are in this group (employing a community work approach in the settings). The theory of the worker [6/UR] in incident G had been built up since his earlier years of practice and maintained the momentum steadily until now. He had never left the community development field, while the career objective of the participant [5/UR] was to become a community worker. Hence, the unit she joined was a community work setting. The similarity between participants 5/UR and 6/UR was that they both employed a community work approach in a community work setting where this was natural and justified. In their theories of practice, a community work approach was an essential working method used in URSST to prevent

residents from being exploited by the urban development system, regardless of the low legitimacy of the community work approach in the secondary settings.

On the other hand, although participant 8/UR was also loyal to a community work approach, she had her theory of practice; she described using the community work approach in the settings as ambiguous – something that may or may not be employed in particular contexts as this all depends on individual practitioner's judgement and reaction to funding bodies intervention. She confirmed that funding bodies dare not explicitly threaten workers' professional autonomy. This part of her theory reflected the worker's [8/UR] assumptions about the funding body's attitude and norms. Unlike other workers who worried about using a community work approach for fear that the funding body would object, this worker [8/UR] conversely discerned that the weak point of the funding body, as a public organisation, was that it could not apparently object to this matter. Besides, in her theory, residents' settling down under urban redevelopment was her ultimate hope for residents. Although she believed in the function of a community work approach, she allowed flexibility in its application – the method could be modified and generated in many possibilities and even applied in case work. This worker [8/UR] emphasised the structural way of thinking instead of a narrow perspective. Her perspective of community work, as well as her theory of practice of using community work, was broader and more flexible than that of participants 5/UR and 6/UR. Her level of perceiving community work was more abstract, pinpointing its essence instead of the method itself. Hence, she

could accept the community work spirit was used and manifested using casework even though she had a bad experience with her colleagues who were former case workers who shared a different mindset from her:

I believe community development is not limited to just organising residents to fight for their interests. In fact, community development is how you guide residents to see their location in the power relationship and the link between their situation and the structural problem. After they understand the power relationship, how they break it is a matter of strategy, which can be in the casework rather than the community development approach. So the critical issue is not whether we can do community action but [how we] guide residents to see how the policy limitation produces unfair compensation under the urban development. In contrast, those colleagues with a strong casework mindset persuaded residents to accept the offer since the policy could not be changed.

[Participant 8/UR]

Noteworthy, participants 5/UR and 6/UR worked in the same unit under an enabling and supportive environment, which meant they had never worried about using the community work approach. In opposite circumstances, participant 8/UR worked with most team members with casework experience, and she was upset and lonely about this since they could not share her community work values. The challenges she faced were far more significant than that of participants 5/UR and 6/UR. To summarise, the main points of the

theories of practice of a group of workers who were committed to employing community work are:

1. Self: Employing a community work approach was an ordinary part of social work practice because they perceived themselves as community workers with passion and responsibility.
2. Other: They empathised with residents because they recognised their vulnerabilities.
3. Environment: The urban redevelopment context was complex, with high indeterminacy and unfair and wrong policy; therefore, they would be flexible, using discretion and reflexive in handling indeterminacy situations.

For another group of workers [7/UR,3/HS,9/BD,10/BD,4/UR] who did not commit to a community work approach although they were aware of its functioning, their theory of practice reflected a precise inclination of being focused on 'survival' in this setting as follows:

1. Self: Social service team workers' positions and professional roles were insignificant in the system, so they avoided undertaking sensitive and high-risk duties.
2. Other: Funding bodies and officers expected the social service team not to create hindrances; their organisational goals and orientation differed from those of social service teams. Workers chose to respect

and obey authority figures like those of the funding body and supervisors in their employing agencies.

3. Environment: The service context was risky and political, and they should be cautious.

### ***Reflection and reflexivity***

Reflection has limitations and is different from reflexivity when used professionally. Professional practice occurs within a variety of communities and is shaped by social relations and discursive codifications (Kinsella, 2012), but “practice based on practitioner’s individual reflection only focuses on worker’s subjectivity without attending to the material, social, or discursive dimensions of practice knowledge – the extra-individual features of practice”(Kinsella, 2012, p. 43). In contrast, according to Sandywell (1996, quoted in Kinsella, 2012, p. 44), reflexivity “can remind reflection of the sociality of all world reference, that takes into account the extra-individual features of practice, and this goes beyond reflection to interrogate the very conditions under which knowledge claims are accepted and constructed”.

Greene (1995) thought reflexivity is an ability to discard what is considered ‘natural’ by those caught in taken-for-granted, in the everydayness of things, which refers to the “Cloud of givenness”. Hence, the goal of reflexivity is to “crack the codes to uncover that in which they are embedded and to consider together the invisible cloud that pervades everyday life and everyday practice, and from this location to envision new possibilities together” (Kinsella & Whiteford, 2009, p. 251). How workers perceived whether they could or could

not employ the community work approach in the secondary settings reflected their extent of using reflection and reflexivity.

From day one, when URSST was established, most frontline workers believed it was hard to employ a community work approach, particularly organising residents to fight for their welfare and interests, since it worked against the operator's interest. The 'natural' here refers to a straightforward power relationship between the funding body (the redevelopment operator) and the contractor (the social service team).

However, this worker [8/UR] did not automatically accept this linear cause-consequence model. Instead, she cracked the code by carefully analysing the ecology of the setting. She identified the weakness of the operator – as a public organisation, it could not explicitly intervene in the profession's autonomy. The operator only showed concern for sensitive issues to the management of social service teams. This was a reciprocal process. The extent to which the operator impacted the agency largely depended on how workers and agencies' management reacted to the operator. By cracking this code, the worker [8/UR] not only had a broader vision to position and employ a community work approach but also perceived the legitimacy of the approach in a more optimistic perspective compared to most other workers:

There were no particular rules and regulations about whether organising and advocacy work could be done in the SST settings. It was pretty ambiguous. It depended on how people made the judgement....the [redevelopment] operators liked to show their concern to agencies [NGOs]. They did not say no because they knew

they could not do so to intervene in our professional autonomy. It was because agencies and workers monitored them. Therefore, they dared not intervene explicitly. However, they did something to concern agencies. So, the impact depended on people's reaction to them. Some were fearful, but others thought they could try using the community work approach. So, officers of the operator would observe how those team leaders or management of agencies interpreted the operator's concern.

[Participant 8/UR]

Furthermore, although this participant [8/UR] was determined to employ the community work approach, her ultimate goal was to help residents settle down from disturbances of urban redevelopment. She discerned that the operator was not purely an administrative system but composed of a large team of diverse staff members influenced by their values and life experience. She was aware that she could engage them by recognising their personal and public interest; as a result, it would be more secure for her to enhance their mutual understanding in everyday practice:

I think the operator was not only one system. It was composed of many people. The people inside had their own values and ways of seeing the world. As they were not machines, they, in their positions, had some leeway. So, if we could lead them to understand residents' situations, they could solve problems using their leeway. As such, it facilitated not only communication but also understanding.



There was a picture in my mind. A manager of the operator called me to share her bad feelings. She was pretty upset. She asked why what she learned about urban redevelopment was different from the real world. She was taught that improving people's living quality was a good thing. However, why do residents always scold me? She told me about this and made me understand her growing environment and educational context, which blocked her horizon to understanding residents.....the conflict between residents and officers because they were caught in their own framework, which blocked their mutual understanding. Conflicts would be decreased if their frameworks were opened for others' understanding.

[Participant 8/UR]

The above examples illustrate that the workers were insightful enough to comprehend the redevelopment operator's weaknesses and successfully built up a not-easy trustful relationship with its officers under such unbalanced power relations. Involved in a complicated dilemma [incident G], another two participants [5& 6/UR] who worked closely in a URSST were facing their genuine feelings toward the residents and the unexpected tendering result. The unexpected tendering result refers to the outcome of the bidding process for the service contract, which the workers did not anticipate. This result meant their team could not continually serve residents in the following service contract. Their dilemma was to choose between being loyal to the residents by supporting their self-initiative in taking action or being responsible to their employing agency by preventing a conflict of interest. To

these participants, the worker-client relationship, which the participant [6/UR] described as righteous, was highlighted by residents' standing up for workers during their adversity. It resulted from a year-long experience in advocacy against the operator to fight for a fairer compensation package. The worker [6/UR] thought righteousness was their moral liability, an affectional return to the residents' giving. Besides, they understood it was impossible to selectively handle residents' real needs but ignored their complex feelings about the team's termination. That is why these workers [5&6/UR] said they could not use 'avoiding conflicts of interest' as an excuse to not respond to residents:

I was angry...we had a good relationship with residents; why [had the funding body] changed us? Residents reacted strongly.....it was quite complex.... that's why we were in an embarrassing position; it was difficult for us to go with residents who were against the funder. We must be condemned if so, I understood.

[Participant 6/UR/Incident G]

My partner and I have discussed.... we thought we should not be indifferent to residents. ....we wanted to show our support to residents, as one kind of return and reaction, Not for the contract. Indeed, residents could sense our goodwill.

[Participant 6/UR/Incident G]

I think ...we were defeated. Of course, as if we were in a black hole that we did not know the real reason. We were unhappy about this. We think

this [tendering exercise] is not fair. I think I am clear in my judgment that this is not just judgment.

[Participant 5/UR/Incident G]

Phronesis touches on ethics. Ethics in this incident not only covered the right or wrong that workers did in tackling the dilemma but inevitably involved workers' judgment of the tendering result. If the result was unquestionable, the saying that workers should avoid a conflict of interest was substantial. Workers were not appropriate if they supported residents' self-initiated actions. Nevertheless, if the tendering result had a problem, the whole story of this incident would be different, and so would social workers' grounds to support residents in their self-initiative actions against the funding body.

Fellow workers of other social service teams also questioned the surprising tendering result so they could provide a third-person perspective on the matter. The participant below [7/UR] first pinpoints the exceptional situation in this instance:

I could not understand.....it was pretty strange. It had never happened. A SST was changed during the redevelopment project. Therefore, it is worth exploring the reason behind this. I think all other operating organisations should examine the reasons behind this. It was related to the funding mechanism. Now, it is funded by the URF under a '2 years plus 2 years' contract...what are your [URF] criteria? What is your [URF] marking scheme in the tendering exercise? I think each team and operating organisation should ask this question regarding the criteria.

[Participant 7/UR]

Another participant [4/UR] does make an association between the result and the team's advocacy work:

I think the team failed to continue the contract in the second half stage due to the redevelopment operator's possible pressure on the funding body since the team had turned over some policies by organising residents.

[Participant 7/UR]

Another worker who also had similar concern pinpointed the critical point that the URF could not resolve all problems of the old funding mechanism:

I have the impression that because the Fund [Urban Renewal Fund] has a lot of people [Committee members of the Fund] who are appointed, it is the same [situation as previously directly funded by the urban development operator]..... Our main worry is about the contract renewal; they [the funding body] must not terminate you [the SST] for no reason, they [the funding body] must not renew with you [the SST] in the following tendering exercise, and there is no mechanism to explain why they [the funding body] are not satisfied with this [SST's] service or why they [the funding body] do not renew any team, they [the funding body] do not need to explain to the team, so they [the funding body] are very ambiguous, so we [SSTs] would think about a lot of things, so everything is self-limited, that is, a sense of fear....

[Participant 8/UR]

Participants 5/UR and 6/UR consolidated their viewpoints in evaluating the tendering result. Firstly, changing a SST in the middle of the redevelopment project had never happened; the team had already built a trusting relationship with residents and did not have a performance issue. Besides, the outstanding issues that residents assisted by the current team were complicated for a new agency to grasp quickly. Finally, changing a team must create unnecessary disturbances for affected residents.

## **7.7 Concluding Remarks**

This chapter, which delves into a context-specific theory about workers' hidden actions in practice, is significantly informed by Glaser's Six C's framework for theoretical coding.

It can be seen that unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainty (aporia of practice) were the conditions under which hidden actions occurred. Incidents selected for analysis illustrate the connection between aporia, the use of phronesis, and its consequences.

The political and ideological context significantly shaped the practice. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the social service teams under study were situated in an environment where an inter-professional collaboration, governed by a contractual relationship between the funding bodies, was dominated by external goods. The workers' decision to take hidden actions was a testament to their commitment to the residents' interests and welfare—this use of reasons involved practical and moral concerns. The aporias of practice that

emerged were recognised by phronesis. By using reasons, workers with this virtue demonstrated their resilience and problem-solving skills, coping with unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainty manifested by negotiating internal goods. Therefore, workers practising in secondary settings might result in emotional distress and a low professional identity. However, this was not a linear causal-consequence model because the two identified contingencies (workers' use of reflexivity identified in their theories of practice and phronetic quality of judgements) function to impact workers' phronetic actions and the consequences. Noteworthy, employing community work was one type of hidden action in practice, while workers' ambiguity in employing community work is also a professional identity issue (see Chapter 6). The connection between hidden action in practice and workers' ambivalence in performing their professional identity in the studied context will be further discussed in the next chapter of theory integration.

# Chapter 8 Theoretical integration

## 8.1 Introduction

This study aims to generate a context-specific theory to explain what was happening in the community work secondary settings (CWSS) regarding workers' professional autonomy. Two core categories were generated using the grounded theory method: 'workers' being ambivalent in performing professional identity' and 'taking hidden actions in practice'. These categories were analysed separately in chapters 6 and 7 using Glaser's Six C's theoretical coding family. These two individual chapters can be seen as part of the context-specific theory. In this chapter, the analysis of the two core categories will be integrated, and their conceptualised level will be raised in order to depict the study phenomena holistically.

## 8.2 Professional autonomy, professional identity and ethically difficult situations

The starting concern of this research was about social workers' professional autonomy when practising community work in secondary settings in Hong Kong. The research question at the beginning was, 'What is going on in the complicated process by which social workers exercise their professional autonomy?' After interviewing four participants, I was impressed by their worrying about employing a community work approach in the setting. This observation affected how I handled the theoretical sampling by approaching workers who had or didn't have worries about employing the approach under favourable and unfavourable environments.

Consequently, two core categories from the data, 'being ambivalent in performing professional identity' and 'taking hidden actions in practice', were generated. It can be seen that workers' professional autonomy was threatened when they performed their professional identity and handled ethically difficult situations in practice. Accordingly, some workers thought using community work in the studied social service teams was a sensitive issue; if this approach was used to fight for residents' welfare, it might support opposite interests to those of the funding bodies. Eventually, some workers avoided using community work or chose to use it hiddenly. They worried the approach would make funding bodies unhappy and affect the team's future contract renewal. The tension was related to the funding mechanism, a structural condition. Meanwhile, workers' integrity was challenged when they paid effort to resolve dilemmas under uncertain situations, particularly taking hidden actions in practice, which caused them to evaluate how a professional should behave. This was also a matter of professional ethics and identity.

Provided that community work is an intervention method, if workers were interrupted when they made a professional judgement of selecting this method as an intervention to help residents owing to a specific structural problem, the interruption was a signal that professional autonomy was threatened. This situation was also related to workers' performing their professional identity, an identity work, because if a professional's working approach was recognised, such recognition would enhance their making of a credible identity. In addition, if workers considered changing their working method or using it hiddenly because of interruption, this decision was an ethical issue, for it would affect residents' welfare and put workers in an ethically difficult situation.



### **8.3 Relation between core categories and sub-categories**

This research focused on an area of micro-ethics manifested in the two core categories. In examining initial codes and focused codes generated from the data, ‘workers being ambivalent in performing professional identity’ and ‘taking hidden actions in practice’ were two core categories while ‘not trusting among clients, social workers and supervisors’ and ‘experiencing negative emotions’ were sub-categories. These core categories were selected owing to their frequency of emergence as well as their connection with those sub-categories. I have used Glaser’s Six C’s theoretical coding family (causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances and conditions) where applicable to analyse the two core categories in chapters 6 and 7.

Participants in this research were asked to share their experiences handling dilemmas in practice. This was an entry point for workers to share their practice experience. Although participants’ perceptions of dilemmas varied, all incidents they selected can be understood as ethically difficult situations. Furthermore, methodologically, the two core categories were analysed individually to identify their respective processes; however, the relation between the two core categories and other sub-categories, if identified, can depict the whole picture of the studied phenomenon.

First of all, there is an apparent interface between the two core categories, ‘workers’ being ambivalent in performing professional identity’ and ‘taking hidden actions in practice’ – workers’ concern about using the community work approach created an identity issue; meanwhile, employing the community work approach was one of their hidden actions.

Besides, it can be seen that the 'condition' of each core category, multiple accountabilities and aporia of practice, were interrelated. When workers made a professional and practical judgement, they needed to consider multiple stakeholders' views, in which some of their interests were conflictual. These conflicts put workers in ethically difficult situations where workers were always caught in deadlock situations and were involved in handling cases or solving problems with high indeterminacy within a limited time. Multiple accountabilities can be narrowed down to three main groups: funding bodies, residents and workers' employers (the social service organisations that operate social service teams). Because of the contracted-out funding mechanism, workers were employed by operating social service organisations, which received financial support from the funding bodies. These organisations had their own interests and organisational goals. Clients sometimes had specific power when they were supported by social activists or other local community workers who were doing advocacy work against the funding bodies. Furthermore, if the operating organisations held a different view from workers when residents' and funding bodies' interests were opposed, and workers chose to stand for the client's side, the situation was much more complex due to the power relationships where workers were situated.

Regarding the connection between the sub-categories and core categories, mistrust among clients, social workers and supervisors reflects the characteristics of the context in which these mistrusts were caused by the funding mechanism and its power relations generated. Workers' mistrust of residents was related to the significant amount of compensation and public rental housing allocation. Sometimes residents would exaggerate their condition for a better benefit;

meanwhile, this pattern, to a certain extent, was caused by the redevelopment operators' inconsistent handling of cases. On the other hand, the mistrust of the concerned group's residents toward workers was directly due to the contracted-out funding mechanism. Finally, workers' mistrust of their employers and the operating social service organisations reflected the welfare service ecology where organisations were concerned with the projects' survival. The funding mechanism produced multiple accountabilities for workers, creating unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainty in practice. In turn, it allowed workers to use practical wisdom to address ethically difficult situations. Nevertheless, workers possibly faced much emotional distress in various practice experiences and their professional identity was adversely affected. Eventually, 'experiencing negative emotions' is the consequence of the two core categories. Workers' negative emotions can also be seen as the result of workers' identity crises, as well as the residue of unresolvable dilemmas.

#### **8.4 Interaction between workers' commitment to community work and use of reflexivity in professional life**

Although a causal relationship is identified in the individual core category, contingencies also appear to affect the direction of the variables, the quality of the core category and its consequences.

The two identified contingencies connected to the core categories are 'workers' commitment to community work' (see section 6.6 of Chapter 6) and 'workers' use of reflexivity' (see section 7.6 of Chapter 7). Workers played an active role in these contingencies. The first reflects the degree to which they were committed to

community work being part of the social work role in the setting. Workers' commitment to community work means their enthusiasm and loyalty in using the approach, their trust in its efficacy and core values; it is closely related to the smoothness of workers' performing their professional identity. The second relates to workers' active reflection on their encounters in practice. Accordingly, "Reflexivity goes beyond reflection to interrogate the very conditions under which knowledge claims are accepted and constructed, and it recognises the sociality of that process" (Frank, 2012, p. 45).

'Workers' commitment to community work' and their 'use of reflexivity', significantly impacted workers' performance and shaped their reaction in tackling ethically difficult situations. These contingencies came from two core categories, generated from workers' accounts of their experience of facing dilemmas in daily practice. In other words, these two contingencies were important elements of situated ethics – 'commitment to community work' and 'use of reflexivity' both are elements of 'ethics in professional life' (Banks, 2010); the former belongs to 'commitment', and the latter is connected to 'character', because workers' reflexivity can be seen as their moral quality. Furthermore, reflexivity can facilitate one's use of phronesis (practical wisdom), which is also one of the focuses of this study. Theorising in the grounded theory method involves raising core categories' conceptual level (Charmaz, 2014); therefore, in doing so, I will examine the interaction between 'workers' commitment to community work' and 'their use of reflexivity'.

Firstly, four combinations of the interrelation between 'workers' commitment to community work' and their 'use of reflexivity' were constructed. This step was

followed by mapping workers' performance of the two contingencies in tackling ethically difficult situations into the four quadrants. Workers' performance in the two contingencies was based on how they handled the incidents under specific circumstances. Therefore, workers and related incidents were put in the relevant quadrant where relevant and applicable. Finally, according to the Satir model, workers' performance was conceptualised based on their handling of those incidents.

Satir's conceptual development on communication is illustrated by her survival coping stances, which provide a model currently used therapeutically to connect the person's internal survival process with their own spiritual essence, or life energy (Banmen & Maki-Banmen, 2014). Accordingly, to survive, people cope in different ways under stress; she also viewed relationships as involving three crucial components: self, other, and context (Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991). How a person acts and feels in relationship to oneself, in relationship to another, and depending on the situation or environment in which the relationship is taking place. The four coping stances are referred to as 'blaming', 'placating', 'being super-reasonable', and 'being irrelevant', which are incongruent because each leaves out an important component of congruent communication that includes acknowledging the self, the other, or the context (Satir et al., 1991). The goal of the Satir model is to foster the use of congruent communication where the self is accepted and congruently represented. At the same time, "the other is allowed to be oneself while the contingencies of the context are taken into account" (Lee, 2002, p. 220). According to Banmen and Maki-Banmen (2014, p. 119), "people are automatically and not conscious of using these survival coping stances; these are

their comfortable behaviours used as a form of protection, rather than personality descriptors”.

In this sense, when I borrow Satir’s concept of communication to analyse workers’ reactions, I interpret the overall tension between workers and funding bodies in daily practice shown in the selected incidents as a stressful condition. Besides, although the coping stances are conceptualised according to an individual’s verbal and non-verbal language relating to other people, I only base my analysis on workers’ handling of the specific incidents discussed in the data, and my interpretation of their thoughts and feelings from the data, in order to examine workers’ balancing between the three crucial components: self, other, and context.

The following table (Table 4) depicts the interaction between workers’ commitment to community work and their use of reflexivity when tackling ethically difficult situations. Each contingency has its positive and negative side, determined by workers’ accounts about how they tackled dilemmas in practice in relating incidents or situations. For example, when I positively classify a worker’s commitment to community work, I base it on the worker’s accounts regarding the related incident(s) in which the worker’s commitment was shown. Therefore, these accounts only refer to workers’ subjective interpretation of a specific scope of practice situations instead of the whole practice condition.

**Table 4: Interaction between workers' commitment to community work and use of reflexivity**

**\*Hidden actions # identity crisis**

	<b>Use of reflexivity (-)</b>	<b>Use of reflexivity (+)</b>
<b>Commitment to community work (+)</b>	<b>Q2 [unclassified]</b> [Participant 9/BD] *N,P	<b>Q1 [congruence]</b> [Participant 8/UR] *H,L,M [Participant 5/UR] *G [Participant 6/UR] *G,H [Participant 1/BD] * # A,B
<b>Commitment to community work (-)</b>	<b>Q3 [placating]</b> [Participant 2/BD] *C [Participant 3/HS] # D [Participant 10/BD] Colleagues of Participant 10/BD	<b>Q4 [blaming]</b> [Participant 4/UR] # E,F

## **8.5 Workers' coping stances and ethics work**

This study focused on micro-level ethics, concerned with the ethical agency of workers practising community work in secondary settings and their ways of tackling ethically difficult situations. Coping with ethically difficult situations is fundamentally 'ethics work'.

According to (Banks, 2016, p. 36):

“Ethics work is the effort people put into seeing ethically salient aspects of situations, developing themselves as good practitioners, working out the right course of action and justifying who they are and what they have done. Broadly speaking, 'ethics' relates to matters of harm and benefit, rights and responsibilities and good and bad qualities of character. The term 'work' covers the psychological and bodily processes of noticing, attending, thinking, interacting and performing”.

As illustrated in chapter 7, with workers' assumption of self, other and context, they developed their theories of practice as principles of doing things in the setting. These sets of theories are individualistic; that is, workers' perspectives determine what they do as individuals. Meanwhile, these workers' assumptions as reflected in practice through action, particularly in tackling ethically difficult situations while doing ethics work, can be categorised into specific coping stances. Since ethics work and coping stances are moral agents' internal processes in relating to people and things, when putting coping stances in the context of professional ethics, the seven elements of ethics work (framing work, reason work, emotion work, role work, identity work, relation work, and performance work) can be perceived as a tool to examine workers' internal deliberation process.



According to Table 4, congruence is the coping stance most workers demonstrated. Workers practising in URSST were slightly more located within this congruent stance than those in BDSST. In contrast, blaming, placating and irrelevant stances were demonstrated by a small number of workers categorised in different quadrants. Regarding the two core categories, workers practising in URSST seldom had an identity crisis as community workers compared to those in BDSST. On the other hand, workers had taken hidden actions in Q1, Q2, and Q3. Notably, all workers with congruent stances took hidden actions, most in URSST. This might be due to the unique urban redevelopment context that makes it easier to produce contradicted policies; hence, there was more space for organising. However, what truly stands out is the workers' determination, which they demonstrated by taking hidden actions in their community work, showing their resilience and strength.

**Quadrant 1 (Congruence – practitioners with positive commitment to community work and use of reflexivity)**

Participants 1/UR, 5/UR, 6/UR and 8/UR are classified in this square. They were all congruent regarding their coping stances based on their performance in balancing self and others and the context in tackling ethical problems relating to funding bodies in practice. Hence, they cared about residents, building up a trustful and solid relationship with them. They understood residents' needs and sufferings well and supported them in the hard times. Besides, they were aware of the constraints faced by their funding and employing organisations; they worked hard to avoid embarrassing them and tried to find solutions in deadlock situations. Although they worked under policy-driven and bureaucratic organisations, they faced their limitations as social workers and were loyal to their commitment to the community

work approach. Although they employed community work hiddenly, it did not mean they were not congruent. In contrast, they had a solid commitment to community work; they did not avoid doing it but only did it hiddenly due to environmental constraints.

Regarding their ethics work, when workers in Q1 made an effort to be ethical workers and tackled ethically difficult situations, their framing work was affected by their commitment to the community work and use of reflexivity. 'Put Client first' was their imperative principle. They perceived what they encountered as being 'residents' welfare was harmed', 'something unjust was found' and 'some core social work values were challenged'. They were sensitive to ethically salient features of situations. Their structural perspective on problems gave them a broader vision of seeing residents' difficulties. Their primary emotions concerned struggling to act according to what they believed in their profession under the constraints of the situation. As a result, their reasoning in resolving ethically difficult situations was pragmatic and directed by their core values. They endeavoured to organise and empower residents to fight for their rights. As such, they earned the residents' trust and built a deep and solid relationship with them.

They all held a robust professional identity as community workers and took hidden actions. They understood community work values well, perceived social phenomena from a structural perspective and showed familiarity with community work techniques and strategies. They believed the values and impact of the community work approach could change society, so they endeavoured to practise community work even under threat and limitation. Only participants 5/UR and 6/UR were located in a supportive team where they had long employed community work openly, whereas 1/BD and 8/UR had to use it in a hidden manner since the community dynamic was complex. Their colleagues at all levels could not share community work values with them. Regarding reflexivity, most participants

in Q1 could understand community work and the service context intensively, think critically and reject those taken-for-granted viewpoints. They considered things from multiple perspectives.

**Quadrant 2 (Workers with positive commitment to community work but negative in use of reflexivity)**

There is only one participant [9/BD] in this square. She did not have an identity crisis but had taken hidden actions. She joined the social service team with a deep-seated dedication to understanding the hardship of people inadequately housed in an old urban district. Her commitment was evident in her efforts to build a caring rapport with residents through home visits. As a social worker of the department and a community worker, she extended her care to vulnerable residents beyond the service boundary, a role that she seamlessly shifted when she visited the out-of-boundary residents during her duty.

For framing work, she thought residents' welfare was more important than her accountability to her employing organisation. Her moral perception was that if she disclosed this group of residents as being illegally housed in an industrial building, they would be homeless. Consequently, she would shoulder a heavy moral responsibility. However, her framing work did not entail a critical reflexivity in practice. Her reasoning work was straightforward, considering only whether residents would be made homeless. She could not get rid of the taken-for-granted mindset that she could only handle cases transferred by the department. She lacked the vision to break through the hindrance of serving out-of-boundary residents. Therefore, she did not employ alternate methods to serve the out-of-boundary residents.

Regarding workers' coping stances, the worker ignored the context; instead, she was only concerned about exploring residents' hardships by visiting them. However, she needed to look into what and how she could serve these residents or deploy resources to render service to them. Exploring different methods and resources for serving out-of-boundary residents is crucial. It can lead to more inclusive and effective community service, ensuring that no resident is left behind.

**Quadrant 3 (Placating – workers with negative commitment to community work and use of reflexivity)**

Participants 2/BD, 3/HS and 10/BD are put into this quadrant; only the former had taken hidden action. They did not have an apparent identity crisis as a community worker because practitioners in this quadrant understood themselves as subordinates of the funding bodies and their employers (the operating organisations). Despite Participant 2/BD's hidden actions, overall, she was obedient in relating to officers; for instance, when handling the older resident's case, she had engaged the client to consider two opposite ways of preparation to accommodate the officer's enforcement. Participant 10/BD perceived social service teams as the subordinate of the department, so workers should accommodate officers' requests to assist in reaching their organisational goals. Workers in this square complied with rules and norms in their work settings. They committed to their job, perceiving themselves as a social worker employed by their organisations or as contracted-out professionals in the funding department. They were obedient in their workplaces, seldom said no, and cooperated with the funding bodies, representatives, and co-workers. They seldom conflicted with co-workers of the funding organisations. They could do good for their clients. However,

as they could have been more critical, they only took ordinary interventions, which are standard or routine actions, as all other social workers did.

Regarding individual workers and teams, their coping stance was the placating one in which they neglected their own needs in relation to authority figures under stress. As individuals, they acted to avoid conflict; as teams, their orientation was to maintain harmonious relationships with funding bodies at all times. To avoid conflict affecting the working relationship with officers and the future contract renewal, they would not work against the funding bodies, even for the residents' interests. They might not be aware of such a placating stance, so they did not necessarily have bad emotions that followed. They saw them as having risks of breaking relationships with stakeholders when things happened. This was their framing work. Sometimes, they overlook ethically salient features because of such a perspective. They aimed to prevent conflict and uncontrollable situations. They emphasised having harmonious relationships with funding bodies and their representatives as the most important relationships. They liked to avoid creating conflict with them. This was the focal point they paid attention to in the ethically difficult situations encountered.

**Quadrant 4 (Workers with negative commitment to community work but positive in the use of reflexivity)**

There is only one worker [4/UR] in this quadrant who encountered an identity crisis regarding his professional role because the funding mechanism created a structural problem. This worker [4/UR] thought that the role of the social service

team was not crucial in the system. As a community worker, he could not use the community work approach because of the nature of the funding relationships and his employing organisation's low-profile culture and conflict-avoiding orientation. He obeyed his employing agency by having a low-profile role, and mainly employed casework.

On the other hand, as a social worker [4/UR] queried his role in assessing cases with high indeterminacy that he needed to refer out of the policy framework. He thought the authorities should take these up. This reflected his overlooking of the role of the social work profession in handling cases with high indeterminacy. He was angry and helpless. Consequently, he chose to avoid his responsibility and shifted his duty and risk to other people. He blamed the system for assigning him a gatekeeper role.

He had not employed a community work approach openly or hiddenly. Noteworthy, he understood challenges and critical issues in the service context. He could see the funding mechanism and workplace dynamics critically and analytically yet took no action to address critical issues except to avoid conflict and fault in practice.

The above discussions in this section examine the interface between ethics work and coping stances to understand workers' internal deliberation process in ethical decision-making. Three main points are identified as follows:

1. Workers' commitment to community work benefited from their use of reflexivity.
2. If reflexivity is absent, workers cannot behave congruently because they lack the moral consciousness, courage, and wisdom to perform their professional identity in difficult situations.

3. Reflexivity, a powerful force, significantly impacts workers' ethics work, particularly in framing, identity work, and reasoning work.

Therefore, although 'ethics work' and 'coping stances' are two different concepts and internal processes, they are deeply interconnected. They facilitate workers' making ethically correct judgments and relate to workers' character and virtue.

### **8.6 Legitimacy as a social process**

By using Glaser's Six C's theoretical coding family (Glaser, 1978), a detailed analysis of each core category was conducted in chapters 6 and 7 and presented in terms of its contexts, conditions, causes, consequences, contingencies and covariances where applicable. In the last section, the two contingencies of the core categories have been used to further conceptualise the findings, through which a noteworthy phenomenon was depicted – workers were ambivalent in performing professional identity, particularly using the community work approach, which was supposedly a right thing; in contrast, they made interventions in a hidden manner for the best interest of clients, which is not unquestionable from the professional viewpoint. First, workers' professional autonomy was interrupted when they performed their professional identity and tackled ethically difficult situations. During these activities, workers had to consider whether employing community work and taking hidden actions in practice were right. The former is a formal intervention method that was presumably right (potentially legitimate), whereas the latter, as said, was not unquestionable from a professional viewpoint.

This phenomenon reflects workers' struggles in practice over the question of 'what is right' under the contracted-out funding mechanism, particularly in terms of either using community work or ways to tackle ethically difficult situations.

Hence, taking into account the starting concern of this research, I judge that the complicated process by which social workers exercise their professional autonomy relates to legitimacy, which is recognised as a basic social process for organisations (Zelditch Jr, 2001).

Johnson et al. (2006) pointed out that among various sociological approaches, social-psychological and institutional approaches are the two broad areas of studying legitimacy. The first approach concerns the connection between legitimacy processes and the creation and maintenance of inequality within organisations and labour markets, whereas the second pays attention to organisational survival and success brought by legitimacy. After reviewing various definitions of legitimacy from both social psychological and institutional approaches, some fundamental similarities are identified (Johnson et al., 2006, pp. 54-55):

“legitimacy is a collective construal process through which a social object is judged to be right; it depends on apparent consensus that most people accept the object as legitimate among actors in the local situation; legitimacy is being consistent with cultural beliefs, norms, and values that shared by social audience in the local situation or in a broader community; a cognitive dimension of legitimacy constitutes the object for actors as a valid and objective social feature while a prescriptive dimension represents the social object as right respectively”.



The community work approach used in social service teams was identified as a social object, and its legitimacy was discussed in section 6.4 of Chapter 6. It can be seen that the social service teams did obtain legitimacy as these teams involved using the social innovation of applying social work in building safety and urban renewal areas. However, the community work approach did not achieve the same wider legitimacy, since it was not beneficial to achieving funding bodies' organisational goals. This legitimacy is related to the noteworthy phenomenon previously discussed as the two generated core categories that involved workers' wider and more complicated practice experience.

Johnson et al. (2006) thought Max Weber's formulation of legitimation offers a central insight that "legitimation occurs through a collective construction of social reality in which the elements of a social order are seen as consonant with norms, values, and beliefs that individuals presume are widely shared, whether or not they personally share them". In this Weberian approach, a matter of legitimacy is social order, instead of a social object, accordingly, social order is legitimate "only if action is approximately or on the average oriented to certain determinate 'maxims' or rules" (Weber, 1978 edition, quoted in Johnson, 2006, p.55). Legitimacy is indicated by actors as either a set of social obligations or as a desirable model of action. As a result, individuals act in accord with that order themselves, even if they privately disagree'—is indicated" (Johnson et al., 2006).

In this sense, Weber's approach is a wider perspective on legitimacy that can capture properties of the core categories of this research as much as possible. Therefore, to adopt Weber's approach further to explain the noteworthy phenomenon, the focus will be put on whether workers' actions or behaviours

comply with the existing social order or not. With reference to the matrix about the two contingencies' interactions, hidden action is the selected action for analysis since it is a salient social action of workers whose commitment to community work is strong.

### **8.6.1 Hidden actions as meaning-attribute-actions**

In a Weberian approach, “social order is constructed at the individualistic consciousness level through the ways in which social actors assign meaning to their actions” (Zelditch Jr, 2001, p. 18, quoted in Mazman, 2005, p.69). Weber defines action “as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behaviour – be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence” (Zelditch Jr, 2001, p. 4, quoted in Mazman, 2005, p. 69); “the reason behind regular actions is the meaning which individuals attribute to their actions, and according to Weber, sociology is only concerned with ‘meaning-attributed-action’ within society”. (Mazman, 2005, pp. 69-70).

Obviously, according to the collected data, when participants chose to take hidden action, they had to violate specific rules or commitments, which those from whom the action was hidden must not discover. This was because workers realised those actions, if not hidden, were not allowed by funding organisations and even their employer (the operating organisations of SSTs) in some cases. Therefore, when workers were taking hidden actions, they understood the actions were not legitimated from the authority figures' viewpoint because those actions did not comply with any social order in their work settings.

Nevertheless, social workers who took hidden actions in this study did have their justifications; they hid those actions from funding bodies and sometimes their employers (the operating organisations) while aiming to accomplish specific kinds of good intentions for clients' welfare, and community work was one of the hidden actions they took. Hence, the good intention that workers upheld was the meaning that workers gave to their hidden actions.

For Weber, this process involves "people giving meaning not only to their own behaviour but also to behaviour of other people in their reciprocal relationships. Individuals' attribution of meaning to action and social relationships gives life its regularity, otherwise, social action would be impossible" (Zelditch Jr, 2001, pp. 13-14, quoted in Mazman, 2005, p.70). This means that individualistic action through social actors' giving meaning to behaviours of other people in social life becomes social action. For Weber, 'action, especially social action which involves a social relationship, may be guided by the belief in the existence of a legitimate order. "People, in the Weberian context, first make themselves sure that their behaviour or action is legitimate within their living socio-political environment" (Zelditch Jr, 2001, p. 75, quoted in Mazman, 2005, p.75).

At this point, regarding social orders that underpinned workers' hidden actions, the analysis involved workers' consideration of other people's behaviour during the process of their decision-making of taking hidden actions. Workers first identified their planned actions (original actions), and then they attached meaning to these actions; meanwhile, they also considered other people's reactions to the original actions based on their experience or relevant information in order to judge if these actions would be allowed in the setting. The meaning of 'guided by the belief in the

existence of a legitimate order' means workers believed those actions were legitimate and supported.

Of course, the authorities would not object to workers' original actions if these actions were legitimated. Therefore, all hidden actions were products of ethical decision-making since these actions, if not hidden, were not allowed by the authorities because they contradicted the funding bodies' organisational goals. The dilemma in front of workers was that they needed to choose between being loyal to clients or these organisations. If they choose to stand for clients, they risk damaging their professional credibility by making their intervention hiddenly. On the other hand, clients' welfare would be sacrificed if they complied with the norms of the work settings. Consequently, workers decided to take hidden actions for the welfare of clients. Weber's legitimacy has two aspects: 'a set of obligations' or 'a desirable action model'. Dornbusch, Scott, and Busching (1975) explicated these two aspects into 'validity' and 'propriety' respectively. Propriety is an actor's belief that a social order's norms and procedures of conduct are desirable and appropriate patterns of action; validity, in contrast, is an individual's belief that he or she is obliged to obey these norms and procedures even in the absence of personal approval of them. Hence, although hidden actions taken have no propriety according to the norms and regulations in the work settings where the organisational goals of the funding bodies dominated, these actions still have validity because workers thought as professionals, they had the responsibility to safeguard clients' welfare.

### **8.6.2 The meaningful sphere of taking hidden actions**

Mazman (2005), who compared Weber and Durkheim on the theory of the constitution of social order, stressed that it is preferred to use 'social regulation' instead of 'social order' in terms of Weberian sociology because Weber sees "the basis of regulation in society is in the meaningful sphere of social action, that means this regulation may or may not imply in society" (Zelditch Jr, 2001, p. 29, quoted in Mazman, 2005, p.69). In other words, for Weber, there is no structurally determined social order; in Weberian sociology, in order to perform any social action, there has to be a suitable social environment for it (Mazman, 2005). In this sense, what is the suitable social environment for the meaningful sphere of hidden actions?

As aforementioned, after evaluating authority figures' perception of workers' original actions, workers chose to act in a hidden manner although the actions were not supported. Apparently, the workers' workplace, the studied social service teams, must be one of the meaningful spheres for social actions. In this setting, the funding bodies had long been established before that of the social service teams. Indeed, workers of the SSTs were not involved in the legitimacy process of social regulations. Meanwhile, these funding bodies, as governmental departments and public organisations, contained certain political and ideological elements, which generated some salient values or cultures that have long been legitimated, including expecting workers to avoid conflict, adhere to procedures and regulations, respect hierarchy and avoid making significant changes in work practice. In addition, Weber dealt with the problem of the rise of legitimate dominations concerning social actors and how people consent to actual political authorities. Therefore, in Weberian sociology, "social regulation is considered as a set of authority relations

in a legitimate domination” (Zelditch Jr, 2001, pp. 31-33, in Mazman, 2005, pp.2074). That is to say, “this order is constituted out of chaotic indeterminacies through reciprocal authority-consent relations among social agents, not from transcendental social laws and principles” (Mazman, 2005, p. 74).

The reciprocal authority-consent relationship in this study is within the contracted-out funding mechanism. The sustainability of community work projects solely depended on whether a service contract could be renewed. The contract of social service teams was regularly renewed from two to four years through open bidding. Social workers who served in social service teams in secondary settings were always expected to help the funding bodies attain their organisational goals. According to the analysis in chapters 6 and 7, when articulating the context under which the core categories were generated, these categories emerged under the same environment in which their cultural beliefs, norms and values were dominated by external goods that worked towards achieving funding bodies’ organisational goals. In other words, from the funding bodies’ perspective, they were ‘purchasing’ social work services from social service organisations to assist them in achieving their organisational goals. The power relations involved funding bodies, operating organisations, community workers and officers. As previously mentioned, the dynamics among these groups are complex. They each had their respective concerns, and some interests were opposed. Since there were multiple social audiences, actors had to take into account various expectations of them simultaneously. Based on the collected data, the nature of binds that workers subjectively sensed originated in the contracted-out mechanism and its associated power relations. Practitioners were in a passive position when handling

assignments referred by the department, especially complex cases, and were expected to help achieve funding bodies' organisational goals.

Nevertheless, there was another meaningful sphere where workers took reference when considering their social actions. Workers thought they were obliged to safeguard clients' welfare by taking hidden actions, reflecting that desirable social regulation was in the professional sphere to which workers belonged. The professional sphere covers the profession (social work), its professional duties, knowledge, code of ethics and practice, and peers in the profession. In workers' daily practice, they might not associate with these professional elements systematically when they come across ethical decisions. Narratively, perhaps workers would ask themselves questions about, 'As a professional worker, what should I do?'. This resulted in workers taking hidden actions, which implied that from workers' viewpoint, their commitment to the profession was more robust than that to the organisation.

As aforementioned, good intentions for clients' welfare were the workers' meaning given to hidden actions. This meaning was generated after reviewing the norms and regulations in both the organisational and professional spheres that were meaningful to workers. The former sphere was dominated by external goods whereas the latter sphere strove for internal goods. In considering the prerequisite of taking hidden actions, based on the data collected, I have argued that the circumstances under which workers took their hidden actions were aporias of practice.

According to Frank (2012, p. 165), "aporias are unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainties in the contexts of professional practice, and there are "always

moments of undecidability and decision, moments when one must act, even if the way forward is not clear, or—more radically—is uncertain” (Green, 2009, pp. 11-12, quoted in Kinsella and Pitman, 2012, pp.166). According to the data, when workers chose to take hidden actions, residents’ welfare or interests were approaching a critical at-risk moment; the dilemma situation where the workers involved were in a deadlock between residents and the department from which they could not move on. Various incidents illustrated how the worker was pushed to a corner where aporias of practice emerged and they had to use phronesis to get rid of the perplexity.

However, phronesis is an elusive concept, and how it can be visualised in professional practice is concerned (Frank, 2012). Based on the data collected, given that aporia was the condition under which hidden actions were taken, workers’ reasoning in using hidden actions to tackle unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainties can reflect the extent to which practitioners used phronesis to address the aporias and even whether phronesis was used.

Within the collected data, workers took into account moral elements in their reasoning process. First, when choosing to take hidden actions to achieve good intentions for clients, these were ethical decisions workers chose between complying with social regulations in the organisational sphere and in the professional sphere, implying being loyal to organisations or clients respectively. Besides, workers shouldered moral responsibility for their actions, rejecting moral compromise to external goods, and negotiated internal goods for residents under a chaotic power relations context. Phronesis is one kind of knowledge, asking for wisdom to prove people against uncertainty and dread. The purpose of phronetic



action is to have ethical and moral overtones. Accordingly, when people have phronesis, they are prepared to take moral responsibility for their actions and the consequences that follow them (Frank, 2012). Therefore, workers who took hidden actions with moral overtones were using phronesis to a certain extent. Hence, their hidden actions were phronetic actions, a form of praxis. And, the further question to ask is what social regulations underpinned these praxes, which is meaningful to workers.

Perhaps the related social regulations can be found in workers' ethics work, which reflects workers' internal process of addressing ethically difficult situations. It connected with workers' matters of concern and was their perception of what was going on at a specific moment. In most workers' framing work, 'putting clients first' was identified, which connected with clients' needs, the consequences that clients had to face, and some universal principles that workers must uphold for the sake of clients. These elements can be found in their codes of ethics, ethical theories and approaches. These knowledge and values bases informed workers' reasoning through formal education and accumulated experiences that adhered to the foundation of professional ethics. Accordingly, vulnerable clients need help from the profession. With a service ideal that leads the profession to support clients appropriately and for the public good, the existence of professional ethics is to check and balance the power relationship and safeguard clients' welfare. Therefore, for workers practising in the community work secondary setting where social work is not a core business and operating organisations are employed through a contracted-out funding mechanism to assist funding bodies in reaching their organisational goals, workers' choosing to stand for clients is their duty. As a

professional, applying theories in practice and complying with codes of ethics can be seen as a form of social regulation within the profession. Furthermore, those who had taken hidden actions in practice did have a strong commitment to community work. They were characterised as adhering to the core community work values and standing firm in front of authority to safeguard residents' welfare; these were social regulations among community workers. Therefore, the related meaning spheres were not only confined to workers' work settings. Since these social service teams were situated in secondary settings, it is understandable that there is more than one meaning sphere to workers, and the parallel meaningful sphere with the work settings is the professional field. That is to say, workers were responsible for two different sets of social regulations, which lacked coordination.

## **8.7 Concluding remarks**

The theoretical sampling of this research was directed by workers worrying about employing a community work approach or not. Two categories were eventually generated, and the connection between professional autonomy, professional identity, and ethical decision-making was identified. Through the Six C's analysis, I found that the contested situations involving workers were caused by the power relations produced by the funding mechanism, resulting from workers' identity crises. Meanwhile, such contested contexts created opportunities for workers to use practical wisdom.

To raise the core categories' conceptual level, the interrelationship between 'workers' commitment to community work' and their 'use of reflexivity in practice' was examined and reconstructed in terms of workers' performance. These analyses

were further conceptualised as workers' coping stances in addressing ethically difficult situations in relation to stressful service contexts in the studied settings. Consequently, a unique phenomenon was also identified – workers worried about employing community work whilst adopting hidden ways for the best interests of the client's welfare. When I integrated the analysis of the two core categories into a context-specific theory, at the same time, I was depicting the social reality that articulates a social process of legitimacy.

The legitimacy was about the social regulations underpinning workers' salient social actions found in this study, hidden actions in practice. It can be seen that there were two sets of social regulations that workers thought were meaningful, working in parallel but with weak coordination between them. These regulations were in the organisational and professional spheres respectively. Community work as a social object did not obtain legitimation in the setting. While addressing ethically difficult situations, workers had to choose actions that complied with social regulations in organisational or professional spheres. For those workers whose coping stances were congruent, they all took hidden actions for clients' welfare. They all complied with the social regulations in the professional sphere that were affected by the foundation of professional ethics.

Community work as a policy-driven service in Hong Kong's development has long been connected with legitimacy regarding its resources granted and prospects. The historical development of community work in Hong Kong played a significant role in socialising workers regarding community work and its professional identity. What was going on in the studied context about workers' professional autonomy was that, under a changing socio-economical-political context, workers were situated in a

newly developed setting in which their professional identity was being reshaped and challenged while workers were struggling in this process. The trend of community development affected by the government's policy and resource allocation operated at a macro level. In contrast, workers in the contesting context, where they had to strive for clients' welfare without sufficient legitimacy and to use practical wisdom, operated on a micro level. In this study, professional identity bridges the macro and micro levels for investigating workers' professional autonomy in secondary community work settings.

## **Chapter 9 Conclusion and discussion**

The context-specific theory generated in this research has been integrated and discussed in Chapter 8. In this final chapter, while concluding how the theory addresses the research questions, I contextualise the research findings into relevant fields to comment on their uniqueness, benefits, and limitations. Finally, the research implications for professional practice will be discussed.

### **9.1 Addressing the research questions**

The main research question I set was, “What is going on in the complicated process by which social workers exercise their professional autonomy in secondary settings?” I set this question at the beginning of this research when I had no concrete idea about what areas of professional autonomy were threatened and how it would happen within the community work secondary setting (CWSS). I phrased the initial question this way because no matter how professional autonomy was defined, it could be reflected in a wide area of professional activity. Based on the data collected in this study, I realise that the professional autonomy issues particularly manifested in two situations:

1. When workers selected their intervention methods to address clients’ needs or concerns, the threat or interruption of professional autonomy emerged. This threat was related to funding bodies; that was, workers had a subjective feeling that their professional autonomy was threatened

since they interpreted funding bodies' attitude to the community work approach as negative.

2. When there was a conflict of interest between funding bodies and clients, workers had insufficient freedom to resolve dilemmas professionally since they could not show their support and provide assistance to clients genuinely and openly.

These two situations were workers' moments of engaging with ethics because they needed to make ethical decisions. If workers under threat compromised by not making their best-selected interventions, clients' welfare was harmed; on the other hand, workers' professional conduct and image were challenged when taking hidden actions to protect clients' welfare. In addition, workers faced professional identity crises because they could not perform what they thought a community worker should do. The complicated connection between values and professional activity described above was theorised as a social legitimation process of social regulations underpinning workers' social actions in professional activity in their meaningful sphere. This subtle and relational process linked professional autonomy, professional identity and ethical decision-making.

Workers' perceptions of professional autonomy are another concern for the research. Professional autonomy is a concept which lacks an agreed definition. This research focuses on its individual application. In this study, participants perceived professional autonomy as their freedom to put clients' welfare as the top priority and to perform their professional duties, particularly making needs assessments and selecting intervention methods to protect

clients' rights under complex service contexts. On the other hand, workers thought their status in the workplace was significant because it affected their performance of their professional identity; hence, they could not accept being a subset of the funding organisations and becoming their subordinates. Furthermore, when clients' welfare was harmed by funding bodies' policies and actions, workers hoped they could explain social workers' views and perspectives to alter funding bodies' decisions. Workers thought an atmosphere allowing different views was vital in secondary settings.

Regarding factors influencing social workers' professional autonomy, there are combined factors in terms of the service context, individual workers' character and professional commitment, and the legitimacy of the community work approach – the dynamic between these has been discussed in Chapter 8 when I presented the theoretical integration.

Concerning social workers' awareness of the threat to professional autonomy, this question can be explained on two levels. On the micro-level, workers did experience different moments of threat in direct practice. As aforementioned, this was workers' subjective feeling of whether their professional autonomy was threatened. However, when workers and social service organisations entered the field of the two related social service teams, they had already realised the fact that the funding bodies directly employed these teams. This understanding has developed their cautiousness about a potential threat ahead to professional autonomy when operating these teams.

Regarding social workers' reactions to the threat, the salient finding in this research is how workers took hidden actions in practice. Their consideration

reflected the approaches social workers used in making ethical decisions. Both consequence-based and principles-based approaches were employed while using situated perspectives simultaneously; particularly when they used practical wisdom to cope with those uncertainties and unresolvable dilemmas.

## **9.2 The shape of the theory**

This research aims to generate a context-specific theory to explicate the process in which workers' professional autonomy was threatened. While constructing theory is not a mechanical process, I have used a bottom-up approach throughout the investigation that "reaches down to fundamentals, up to abstractions, and probes into experience" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 245).

Firstly, the two core categories, 'workers being ambivalent in performing their professional identity' and 'taking hidden actions in practice', were generated based on workers' accounts in actual practice situations. I used gerunds when coding because, as Charmaz (2014, p. 245) suggests, "it can prompt thinking about actions and fosters theoretical sensitivity because these words nudge us out of static topics and into enacted processes". In other words, the two core categories reflected actions that repeatedly happened in incidents shared by participants.

An individual theory about each core category was analysed and structured informed by Glaser's Six C's coding family. These two individual theories were integrated into a context-specific theory by using the two contingencies of the core categories (workers' commitment to community work and their use of



reflexivity) to raise their conceptual level. These contingencies are essential parts of 'ethics in professional life' (Banks, 2016), namely 'character' and 'commitment' of core categories, which impact the quality of core categories and their consequences, deemed significant. I first categorised worker's reactions in handling ethically difficult situations by examining their interaction between the contingencies, and eventually, this was visualised in a matrix. After putting incidents into different matrix quadrants, I could identify workers' behavioural patterns according to the four coping stances based on Satir's theory of communication. Theorising is like doing artwork; as Charmaz (2014, p. 245) states: "Theoretical playfulness enters in. Whimsy and wonder can lead you to see the novel in the mundane". Actually, the use of Satir's concepts of coping stances might be taking a risk if it was overused. I gained insight into workers' salient behaviour depicted in the four quadrants – 'taking hidden actions'. I chose the Satir model because I have long used this theory to analyse my clients who received casework services. I realised this model is effective in reviewing clients' communication patterns and understanding stress. The coping stances can be easily understood because this model simply views an individual's balancing of the self, other, and context under specific situations. Finally, I found that 'congruence' and 'placating' were two opposite stances, corresponding to 'hidden actions', that explained workers' patterns in reacting to authority figures under a pressured and unfavourable environment.

The shape of the theory became more apparent after workers' coping stances were depicted. Finally, I used 'legitimacy' to conceptualise the complicated

process between values and professional activity. Weber's theory of legitimacy further explained a salient phenomenon – right things could not be done openly – regarding social regulations that underpinned workers' social actions.

Consequently, the theory generated has three layers. The top is 'the social process of legitimacy (between values and professional activity)', while 'workers' coping stances plus behavioural patterns' are in the middle. The bottom is the 'two specific theories for each category informed by Six C's.

### **9.3 Uniqueness and benefit of this research**

This research explores workers' professional autonomy when practising in two social service teams in community work secondary settings. The two core categories generated are related to professional identity and ethical decision-making, of which some phronetic stories were identified. The findings connect professional autonomy, professional identity, and ethical decision-making, which belong to micro-level ethics from a situated perspective. Consequently, the research findings were theorised as a social process of legitimacy underpinning workers' social actions in which the connection between micro-ethics and macro-ethics was shown. To evaluate this research, three significances and contributions are identified.

### **9.3.1 Shed light on practitioners' resistance**

Social workers in the studied social service teams practised in a difficult and unfavourable environment. They were exposed to the risk of violating social work values and ethics while they complied with rules and regulations or fulfilled work expectations set by the funding bodies.

Similar research or discussions about social workers practising in difficult positions are identified in the literature. For example, a paper written by Maylea and Hirsch (2018) explores the responses of social workers practising in a controversial setting – the Australian detention centres for asylum seekers – they had to seek to end this systemic abuse, or they would be accused of collaborating. This paper explores how social workers could respond in this setting.

There is another empirical case study conducted by (Kjørstad, 2005) about social workers implementing the workfare policy in municipal social welfare offices in Norway, concerning social workers' ethical positions in this gatekeeping institutions and bureaucratic context where internal rules and policies of the system greatly impacted the social workers' practice. The study does not analyse cause and effect relationships but understands the roles played by the practices studied in the broader system of relations.

Apart from focusing on specific service settings, the discussion also touches on a broader atmosphere and deeper factors that constitute practice struggles. For example, Weinberg and Banks (2019) comment that the current unethical climate in the social work field is closely linked to neo-liberalism and managerialism.

Also putting focus on difficult practice context, the theory generated in this research sheds light on workers' resistance which I describe as the following 'darker side' of professional practice caused by the tensions between funding, power and community work:

1. Community work could not be used without worrying about the funding bodies' perspectives.
2. Workers had to take hidden interventions for clients' best interests.
3. Workers' self-limitation and placating coping stances disrupted the foundations of professional ethics.

I use the term 'darker side' to mean something invisible and linked with negativity. We cannot deny these elements in practice because they are realities. However, I do not perceive 'dark' as 'wrong' regarding the actions and people involved. In contrast, there is a possibility that we can look for the hope of a beacon. Furthermore, this research illustrates hidden actions in practice, which might lead people to judge practitioners who commit to these actions as inappropriate and even wrong. Nevertheless, this phenomenon can be interpreted as workers privatising their challenges and ambivalence in encountering ethically difficult situations (Fossestøl, 2018). Instead of judging practitioners, the field should recognise the importance of evaluating the structural problems behind this phenomenon, as highlighted by this research.

### **9.3.2 Depict workers' use of phronesis in addressing ethical difficult situations**

The second uniqueness of this research is related to workers' use of phronesis in addressing ethically difficult situations.

Studies related to phronesis are conducted in various professional disciplines, including social work, education, medicine, and nursing. Scholars who conduct these studies highlight the importance of virtue ethics and the use of phronetic knowledge in social work (Holmström, 2014; Papouli, 2019; Petersén & Olsson, 2014), theoretical discussion on the relationship between practical wisdom and the profession (Cheung, 2017, 2022; Chu & Tsui, 2008). Phronesis means practical wisdom; it is unsurprising to identify studies about engaging phronesis in addressing ethical issues. These include those like Banks (2018), who connects phronesis with her developed concepts of 'ethics work' in social work practice and discusses using professional ethical wisdom in a psychiatric social work case. Studies of phronesis also link with reflective practice and praxis. The object being analysed as praxis varies in terms of its range, from an incident to social service as a whole; for instance, in the study by Ferguson (2018), social service is perceived as praxis, a good practice, that phronesis comes in to encounter domination of technical rationality.

However, Thompson and West (2013) point out that research on the practical application of the virtues in everyday practice has been neglected in the social work field compared to other disciplines such as medicine, nursing, education and psychology.

In the medical field, phronesis may also address ethical decision-making. For example, in one study (Conroy et al., 2021), if a doctor feels professionally vulnerable in handling dilemmas, phronesis is seen as a non-prescriptive alternative approach for ethical decision-making based on an application of accumulated wisdom gained through previous practice dilemmas and decisions experienced by practitioners. In the nursing field, it is asked if adequate opportunities are provided for acquiring phronesis in training. Meanwhile, in the education field, phronesis is believed to enhance professionalism by utilising its wise, practical reasoning that suits the reflective nature of teaching activity (Plowright & Barr, 2012). How to craft interventions to cultivate phronesis is also an interesting area in phronesis and moral education (Kristjánsson, 2014). In the work of Florian and Graham (2014), the concept of phronesis is considered a tool for exploring questions about teacher decision-making concerning inclusive pedagogy and how phronesis might be taught.

Compared to the above studies on phronesis, the main finding of this research is that workers' taking hidden actions in practice aims to address uncertainty and unresolvable dilemmas. As analysed in Chapter 7, this phenomenon was concluded as workers' using phronesis in ethical decision-making; hidden actions are praxis, the phronetic actions. Workers' use of phronesis in addressing ethically difficult situations under pressured and unfavourable circumstances highlights workers' moral considerations, illustrating when and how phronesis was used by connecting its relationship with aporia and

praxis. In this sense, this study could more or less advance the existing theory and practice of phronesis as a decision-making approach.

### **9.3.3 Exploring the interplay between ‘micro-ethics’ and ‘macro-ethics’ in community work**

The last uniqueness of this study is related to ethics and community work. Overall, ethics as a research topic is underexplored in the community development field; most focuses are on macro-ethics, which are usually perceived as political issues regarding power and resource distribution (Banks, Shevellar, & Narayanan, 2023).

This research regarding micro-level ethics takes a situated perspective, examining workers’ theories of practice and ethics work. In addition, workers’ professional identity and identity work link up the issues between micro and macro ethics.

At the macro level, this research reflects the impact of neoliberalism and social welfare reform on community development services in Hong Kong, specifically on how much public resources should be distributed to community work. Community work as a policy-driven social service obtained legitimacy in its early years of development, through which local practitioners’ professional identity of community work was built.

Workers in this research were located in the community work secondary settings while at the crossroads, struggling to uphold their core values and perform their professional identity. Their old identities being brought into a

new service setting under the new welfare era constituted enormous ethical challenges to practitioners in everyday practice. This process demonstrates the interplay between ‘micro-ethics’ and ‘macro-ethics’ and depicts the scene for workers to move between people and issues.

#### **9.4 Limitations of this research**

Due to the sensitive nature of this research topic, the data source can only depend on frontline practitioners’ accounts of their direct practice experiences. Indeed, this way and orientation can understand practitioners’ thoughts and feelings on the studied topic. Nevertheless, since this research studies community work secondary settings, perceptions from funding bodies’ perspective, particularly their frontline representative, if collected, would be valuable, and so would the views from the managerial staff of the worker’s organisation.

In addition, although I, as an insider researcher, did have many parallel experiences in the settings, to avoid bias, my self-reflection and observation in the field were not used in this research. How to use an insider researcher’s self-reflection in a balanced manner can be explored in future similar studies.

Although I have avoided producing bias throughout the research process, my role as an insider researcher undoubtedly created an impression of bias. This limitation was unavoidable, mainly because I employed the grounded theory methodology. For example, when doing the theoretical sampling in such a small sector, I could not give up studying the ‘Chun Tin Incident’ since that was a precious and rare opportunity for a URSST team to employ community



organising work explicitly and comprehensively. This decision aimed to fill a significant theoretical gap.

Another limitation is related to the elusive nature of phronesis, which is one of the salient findings of this research. As I used the grounded theory method, in the beginning, I did not plan to investigate workers' ways of applying phronesis in addressing ethically difficult situations. It was developed step by step, first from the core categories generated, then how it was analysed was guided by the ongoing literature review that affected my theoretical sensitivity. All participants did not express that they had used phronesis. My analysis was interpretative. It was difficult to prove someone was using phronesis, even though the actors themselves did it. To address this limitation, I identified workers' moral considerations when making difficult decisions, connecting their wise actions with two related concepts: aporia and praxis.

## **9.5 Recommendation for future research**

I started this grounded theory study due to my personal practice experience with practitioners' professional autonomy. By theorising this context-specific phenomenon, the product of this research covers several areas, and some brief recommendations are highlighted as follows:

1. Similar research concerning practitioners' professional autonomy can be extended locally from community work services to other mainstream social work services.

2. Research on the 'darker side of practice' (see section 9.3.1 of this Chapter) can be further explored. This study focus can help understand practitioners' resistance and remind the sector and the profession of the importance of practitioners' pursuing internal goods.
3. Phronesis is an elusive concept. This study uncovers its operation in practitioner's ethical decision-making. Although it is difficult to identify evidence that one uses phronesis, further research to study such trajectory in practice is undoubtedly valuable.

## **9.6 Concluding comment: recommendation to practice**

This research focuses on two types of social service teams in the community work secondary settings in Hong Kong and unveils practitioners' ethical struggles when safeguarding client welfare. The research depicts the interplay between micro and macro-level ethics in which the connection between professional autonomy, professional identity and ethical decision-making are identified.

Different phronesis stories about rejecting moral compromise, negotiating internal goods, and safeguarding practitioners' authenticity are generated. It can be seen that participants were practising in a difficult and unfavourable environment where their believed social regulations that underpinned their social actions of good intentions for clients did not have legitimacy. I hope workers practising in any unfavourable and difficult environment with ethical struggles could learn something from this research.

Among all findings, I am disappointed by workers' placating stance in coping with stressful situations relating to funding bodies. Under a contracted-out mechanism, some workers and their colleagues, including supervisors, sacrificed clients' welfare for the sake of projects' survival. Workers of social service teams were employed to assist residents with different hardships caused by building safety or urban redevelopment issues. However, some workers and even managers behaved in a placating manner so as not to work against the funding bodies. Professional ethics should have been established to balance the power relationship between workers and clients with different vulnerability levels. Workers adopting a placating coping stance did work against the foundations of professional ethics.

For placating workers and managers who were concerned with 'project survival', was there any moral consideration in their mindset? What was their understanding of the best interest of clients? This is a void in my understanding of professional practice in this research. Gratefully, another group of workers used phronesis (practical wisdom) to protect clients' welfare even in difficult situations. This may be a beacon of hope that emerged in the darker side of professional practice.

However, practitioners using their practical wisdom may experience hostility since the economic rationalities guide professional practice strongly (Pitman & Kinsella, 2019). In the studied service context, phronesis was not prioritised compared to attaining organisational goals. Furthermore, generally, organisations prefer to invest minimum resources in service development that

can address social problems rather than enhancing workers' ethical capability as its outcome is unmeasurable.

This study took place in Hong Kong, a city that has experienced a substantial socio-political change since the second half of this study. In 2019, the 'anti-extradition protests' emerged, which opposed the government's proposal to amend the fugitive offenders bill, resulting in a year-long social unrest that dramatically changed the political landscape. Community development, as an intervention method, is intricately linked to the political climate of its location of practice, and this must surely impact practitioners' space of rendering service while adhering to its core values. We need to observe the impact of this change on community work as well as social work practice at large. However, this change will undoubtedly pressure practitioners' use of practical wisdom, highlighting the urgent need for adaptation in practice.

"Phronesis cannot be taught"(Kinsella & Pitman, 2012b, p. 168). We need to consider how phronesis could be used more and how we can assist practitioners in building a habit. At this point, promoting reflective practice is suitable as it is safely said that phronesis involves reflection (Frank, 2012). Reflection does play a central role in the process of deliberation and is deemed beneficial to the development of practical wisdom in contemporary times. The reflection continuum, which covers several forms of reflection (intentional, practical reflection, embodied reflection, critical reflexivity, and receptive forms of reflection), criteria for making judgements, and criteria oriented toward phronetic ideals, can be promoted and taught to practitioners through various means (see 7.6 of Chapter 7).

The starting point of this study was the potential threat to practitioners' professional autonomy within a specific service setting. The focus was on the environment. After this study, I advocate adopting phronesis as a beacon of hope in practice in unfavourable environments. This study, to a large extent, bridges the gap between practitioners' identity work and ethical decision-making in which practitioners' inner voices can guide them in distinguishing right from wrong, and I deeply respect this aspect of their professional journey. The crucial question is whether professionals can be true to their inner voice under pressure. In this context, practitioners require phronesis, an additional virtue emphasising moral consideration.

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# Appendix – Interview guide

Durham University

**Department of Sociology (the former School of Applied Social Sciences)**

Professional ethics and autonomy in community work secondary settings in Hong Kong

## **Interview guide**

*This interview guide is mainly designed for a semi-structured interview of the captioned study. As a focus group aims to identify the scope and trajectory of the study, which will be conducted before all in-depth interviews, questions of sections (B) and (C) in this guide will also be used in the focus group. The content of this interview guide is subject to change according to the findings of the focus group.*

## **Basic information about participant's work settings**

1. What type of community work secondary settings (CWSS) are you serving?  
What is your job position and its main duty? How long have you served in this position?
2. How would you describe the working relationship between your employing agency and the funding body of your work settings, i.e. CWSS?

## **Professional autonomy**

1. How do you understand professional autonomy?

2. Generally speaking, how would you describe the condition of professional autonomy in your work settings?
3. Have you ever found your professional autonomy to be limited or threatened in your work settings? How did it happen?
4. Did you take any action to protect your professional autonomy?

### **Ethical decision making**

1. What are some of the main ethical issues in your work? How often do they arise?
2. Can you give an example of an ethical dilemma you faced in your work? How did you resolve this dilemma? Did you resolve the dilemma by yourself? Was there any role of your supervisor in resolving this dilemma?
3. What did you consider when you made ethical decisions? What approach did you employ in making ethical decisions?
4. How would you describe your autonomy in making ethical decisions in your work settings?
5. Did you feel any tension while making ethical decisions? Where did these tensions come from?
6. What did you do to protect your autonomy in making ethical decisions? Can you share some examples to illustrate the entire process?

### **Worker's commitment**

1. Can you tell me your unit's overall mission or core social purpose (service ideal)? Is this service ideal for sharing among colleagues in your service settings?

2. Can you act out the core mission of community development work in your daily practice?
3. What are your core values, either personal or professional, in performing the role of the social worker in this setting?
4. Did you encounter any situation with values conflict during your practice? What are these?
5. What are your main sources of work motivation in the current position?

**Worker's character**

1. Do you have any personal goals of being a social worker and how it is relating to your professional practice in current position?
2. What quality of character do you think a good social worker should have? Do you think you have some of this quality of character?

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