



COVID-19:
Collective Responses to
Challenges in Hong Kong
Ada Kot

Sparkling Counseling & Consulting Services, Hong Kong
adakot.counsellor@gmail.com

Introduction

Hong Kong is located at the frontier of a battlefield fighting against the pandemic since the first outbreak in China and is still struggling with the third wave of COVID-19 in August 2020. When the world had no idea about the upcoming threat, the people of Hong Kong were aware of the news of a cluster of suspected pneumonia cases in the city of Wuhan in December 2019. In the beginning of the outbreak of COVID-19, in China, the people of Hong Kong responded calmly because of the lesson they learnt from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has lasted for more than half a year, precautionary measures have been imposed and tightened up, which raised challenges for all sectors in society. With the practice of social distancing and limitation for public gathering, education and in-person services including counseling are deeply affected. This opened up opportunities for helping professions to reconsider their modes of service, ethics in practice and self-care.

Lesson learnt from the SARS epidemic in 2003 and Social Unrest 2019

In November 2002, Guangdong, the nearby province in Mainland China geographically connected with Hong Kong, experienced an outbreak of the

atypical pneumonia later termed SARS. It reached Hong Kong in March 2003 and caused a total of 1750 cases, 286 death from 11 March to 6 June 2003. People learnt the importance of adequate epidemiological information, risk of infection of medical and healthcare workers during the epidemic, and the need of improving the overall healthcare system in Hong Kong (Hung 2003). At the individual level, wearing a mask became a habit among people in Hong Kong (Ting 2020), not only as personal precaution but also for humility and for the community, in order to prevent the disease from spreading further.

This story repeated itself in December 2019. When there was an outbreak of cases in China, the Hong Kong community was alert. Pre-cautionary measures were enhanced by individuals, such as wearing mask and washing hands. Prices of masks were tripled up in late January 2020. Mainland China netizens took to ridiculing people of Hong Kong for buying masks, stating that this is an overreaction, or it was just an excuse for continuing social unrests. In fact, due to the pro-democracy protests, critical thinking, distrust towards the Hong Kong government, fact-checking, collective and mutual support actions grew among the people. Although the anti-mask law has been effective since early October 2019, during the social unrests, citizens tended to wear masks and ignore the law that prohibited the use of masks.

On 4 January, the Hong Kong Government declared a “serious response level” to the virus outbreak in Wuhan, while medical experts in Hong Kong urged mainland authorities to be more transparent in releasing Wuhan patient data for epidemiological study (Cheung 2020). People advocated the shutting of borders with China, in the community. Front-line medical workers launched a 5-day strike in early February, 2020 to urge for closing all borders, in order to relieve the pressure on the healthcare system. The Hong Kong Government closed all but three border control points which remained open after the strike, and the demand made by the public was not answered completely. A huge increase of demand in disinfectant products such as alcohol and bleach, daily products including rice and toilet paper, and most importantly masks, led to an ongoing panic buying. Frontline medical workers were also under pressure due to shortage of protective gear, such as surgical masks. There had been criticism leveled against the Hong Kong Government for being incompetent in fighting against the pandemic, in

comparison with the Macau and Taiwan Governments, which are located closely to China and had also suffered from SARS.

The 2019 social unrests turned silent because of the pandemic, however, the knowledge and skills generated, which are rooted in the community promptly transferred to meet the challenges of the pandemic successfully within the community. In the light of the situation wherein the people in Hong Kong strongly distrusted the Hong Kong Government, fact-checking and speedy information circulation during social unrests transformed into a comprehensive information hub of pandemic website, including public places visited by patients and well-presented epidemiological relationship of clusters cases. Journalists urged the Hong Kong Government to disclose details of cases in the daily press conference held by officials with clues provided by netizens. In response to the panic shopping, community neighbours relied on Facebook groups to barter daily products, individuals supported the elderly and disabled people in the community proactively by checking-in for their daily needs. Retailers, especially those who supported the social movements in 2019, mobilized resources to secure a supply of daily essentials with the purpose of protecting people and ensuring their safety and health especially of the most vulnerable in the community. Many retailers donated surgical masks for frontline medical workers in the healthcare system. Netizens designed an online “Mask calculator” for people to estimate the need of masks based on number of household members and working days, and encouraged people not to stock up and share extra masks with the underprivileged. Proactive collaboration in the community, together with a high level of self-discipline in social distancing, helped the city flatten the confirmed case curve in the first wave imported from China in January 2020, and in the second wave imported from people infected from overseas in March 2020.

Third wave of Covid-19 in Hong Kong

Unfortunately, collective practices could not save Hong Kong from COVID-19. The city experienced a third wave in July and August 2020. The daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases reached as high as 149 on 30 July, the city had 4,692 confirmed

cases and 77 deaths as of 24 August 2020. Sadly, the death toll increased sharply under the third wave and most of these cases accounted for the elderly, infected in elderly care homes. The Hong Kong Government not only refused to close all the borders with the Mainland to reduce the risk of the virus entering Hong Kong, but also ignored the medical experts' advice. Experts pointed out the measure of home quarantine instead of mandatory quarantine camps for returnees from overseas. The Government exempted testing and quarantine for people like seamen, aircrew and executives of listed companies, which allowed around 200,000 people to enter Hong Kong with no medical inspection which proved to be one of the loopholes in the system (HKU 2020).

Since the second wave, the Government implemented precautionary measures such as limiting public gathering, temporary closure of public and entertainment premises such as gyms, cinemas, libraries, suspension of public services, restricting "dine-in". All these measures were tightened during the third wave. In late July, the Hong Kong Government did not allow dining in restaurants, other than hospital and police canteens, which forced blue-collar workers such as cleaners, street promoters and construction workers to eat on the dusty streets during heavy rain and heat. The community demonstrated solidarity again in response to the inhumane measures implemented by the government, churches, small shops, including hair salons and clothing shops welcomed people to eat inside their premises with social distancing measures in place. The Government agreed to open the community hall for people to eat inside and suspended this facility after two days. Sentiments of anger, frustration and complaints against the government increased, but the Government refused to apologize and take up responsibilities for the cause of the third wave that led to a sharp increase in the death toll and the inhumane rule of prohibiting eating in restaurants. Furthermore, it is said that the precautionary measures and financial support in response to the down slide of the economy were to protect the corporate consortia with no consideration for grassroots causes. Moreover, the Hong Kong Police is being criticized for implementing precautionary measures to control protests. With the implementation of National Security Law and the postponing of Legislative Council elections, the sentiments of hopelessness and helplessness have grown within the public over the Summer of 2020.

Impact on Helping Professions

The Education sector has been deeply affected. Schools, including kindergarten, primary schools, secondary schools, special education schools and universities have been suspended since January 2020. Although face-to-face classes have resumed since late May, the third wave took away the memorable event of graduation ceremony for a lot of students and smashed their hopes of resuming face-to-face classes in the new academic year starting from September 2020. Teachers faced huge challenges in conducting online classes, double-income parents were tired of balancing taking care of children and working at home, students with special education needs lacked face-to-face services. Kindergartens are at a risk of closing, as parents consider that face-to-face class cannot be substituted by online class for young students. They thus stopped paying tuition fees. This is especially true for families facing financial difficulties due to the COVID-19. Educators are not only facing challenges and risks in their careers, but are also tired of answering to the demands from parents and the Education Bureau, when most of the school arrangements in response to COVID-19 are delegated to the school authorities for the final decision of implementation. In addition, schools are expected to cooperate with the Government for National Anthem Law and National Security Law that are put into effect recently. Schools are facing the dilemma of pressure from the Education Bureau to cater to the pressing needs of caring for students' mental wellbeing due to the social movements in 2019 and COVID-19. Due to the social movements, and the implementation of the National Security Law, not only students, but also educators are concerned with issues of trust and privacy, which hinder their ability to seek help and advice for the mental well being of students.

Social welfare sector is also affected by COVID-19, especially those serving foreign domestic helpers. On top of the entry restriction due to COVID-19, language barriers, lack of information regarding COVID-19, compulsory quarantine, poor living environments in hostels and employment issues raised during the pandemic, the workload of workers supporting foreign domestic helpers has increased, especially when there is a cluster of Indonesian domestic helpers with confirmed cases during the third wave. In order to maintain social distancing, work from home arrangements in various agencies also multiplied the workload of this

group of helping professions. With the well-known work efficiency among people of Hong Kong, work from home arrangement implied that people may extend working hours as there are no clear boundaries between work and personal life. While there is a concern and support for the needs of the underprivileged population during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a lack of concern regarding psychological support for their helping professions.

With increasing frustration, the concern of mental wellbeing was raised. However, counselors and therapists in Hong Kong are challenged by restrictions during the pandemic as their traditional training and modes of service are mainly conducted face-to-face. Different from the scenario overseas, with high accessibility in the city, the services of online counseling are underdeveloped. There is a lack of training, ethical concerns such as confidentiality, knowledge of supportive devices and interface, etc. Only a few agencies are offering counseling services for suicide prevention, AIDS prevention and youth engagement etc. To a certain extent, maintaining social distancing means suspension of most of the psychotherapy and counseling services in Hong Kong during the outbreak of COVID-19. The urge to change and adopt technologically assisted modes of service induces pressure on psychotherapists and counselors, whether they work in the public or private sector.

Application of Narrative Practice Under COVID-19

Text counseling is an alternative way to offer support, while social distancing needs to be maintained, and people are living in small crowded flats that do not ensure privacy. Online video counseling needs a person to have a physical place ensuring privacy, where their conversation may not be heard by others, along with a password-secured stable internet. It has also been difficult for families in Hong Kong to avail such services if all members stay at home, simultaneously sharing Wi-Fi to access internet. Text counseling is an alternative way for people to share their worries, concerns, and stories, with real-time or delayed response from their counselor via apps or email. With the integration of narrative practices, a postmodern approach based on the meaning of the language

used in which people understand their lives and narrate their life stories, text counseling could be a therapeutic documentation for the people. In narrative practices, documentation is used in multiple and creative ways (Dulwich Centre 2020). Although it is applied during in-person meetings, 'rescuing the said from the saying of it', the mindful principles and practices are good reminders in text counseling. According to Newman (2008), it is important to double-check with people for the words or phrases they use when writing documentations. Through the process, preferred actions and values of the person might also be explored. The counselor is the audience of the person, connecting with the person through sharing of resonance. It also serves as a 'responsive diary' for the person, that encourages the person to spend time on self-care and have them reflect on their life under the seamless daily routine of work from home. In the safe space of text counseling, people do not need to show their face to ensure privacy, especially when it has become a great concern in Hong Kong now. Both the person and counselor have the obligation to ensure security of the device and internet used, by using VPN, and changing and not disclosing passwords to third-parties. Furthermore, although people are separated due to social-distancing, through careful and anonymous circulation of documents with the consent of the person, local knowledge and skills of tackling challenges generated from the individuals will be a contribution to the wider community that may connect with other people in a similar situation, but may not be willing to speak up due to privacy concerns.

Support for Helping Professions

There are huge demands of training in transforming services into online mode for helping professions, including teachers and counselors. When people were getting used to Zoom, there was a privacy concern, which induced additional pressure on them. Teachers were facing the pressure of not being able to ensure students' attendance and attention, as online pedagogies were not widely applied before COVID-19 too. For counselors, especially those in private practice, to avoid in-person contact business dropped sharply, which caused financial pressure for the business. In addition, there was a lack of guideline in tele-health and online counseling as well. Although training and review of guidelines on ethical issues

for online counseling are offered by training and professional bodies, the need of support for mental wellbeing of helping professions have been forgotten. On-going supervision is not a requirement for the requirement of counselor registration in Hong Kong. Without support for the personal growth and guidance in professional development, caring of the self needs awareness and initiative from the counselors themselves. Under COVID-19 pandemic, counselors need to be well-prepared psychologically – before the economic downfall sets in heavily on the city – to serve people with a healthy mental wellbeing. It is an ethical issue if the counselor is under financial pressure, and thus providing promotion or offering services in ways stressing the needs of mental health care; it could then turn into oppression of others.

Summary

In conclusion, people of Hong Kong will be proud of their collaboration in fighting against COVID-19 pandemic, and not being beaten down by the third wave. COVID-19 brings challenges and crises for helping professions, but it also creates opportunities for educators to equip themselves with more updated pedagogies, and it is a time for students and the society to understand the importance of school life. For counsellors, it provides a break for them to review ethics issues in providing services, expand and transform service modes, and most importantly, to take time for self-care.

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