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Examining the Neoliberal Discourse of Accountability:

The Case of Hong Kong’s Social Service Sector

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**Abstract:** Social workers always strive for an intricate balance between the competitive demands of different discourses of accountability. However, the neoliberal welfare regime, which privileges the ideologies of free market, choice, and managerial control, has synchronized the different discourses into a neoliberal discourse of accountability. Using Hong Kong as an example, this paper examines how this discourse is put into practice and how it demoralizes the social work profession. To resist this discourse, social workers may need to work reflexively with their service users in and outside their workplace.

**Keywords:** Accountability, Neoliberalism, Hong Kong, Reflexivity, New Public Management

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Introduction

As a self-proclaimed profession, social work has long been aware of the importance of accountability (Burton and Van Den Broek, 2008; Clark, 2005; Leung, 2006; Reamer, 2005). However, the issue of accountability in social work has always been tricky. As members of a helping profession, social work practitioners are supposed to be primarily accountable to our service users, as well as to the profession. However, in many countries, social workers are largely employed by either the government or publicly funded social service organizations as a part of the state welfare system (McDonald et al., 2003). As publicly funded employees, social work professionals are also accountable to the organizations that employ them and the state (Tsui and Cheung, 2009). Yet social work practitioners’ accountability to these four stakeholders—client, the profession, employing organization, and the state—is not always congruent. Instead, they can be very conflicting. Very often, social work practitioners are caught between these competing demands, which are discursively framed and administratively monitored by different types of policy documents ranging from the professional code of ethics, organizational policies, to governmental policies (Ife, 1997).

In the last three decades, accountability systems embedded in public funding have been shaped by neoliberalism (Spolander et al., 2014), which has proliferated into all levels of social organizations through state policies (Bourdieu, 1998; Harvey, 2005). A
new institutional logic based on business management has forged the New Public Management model (hereafter NPM). Embracing the principles of cost-efficiency, competition, and instrumental rationality, NPM introduces a new discursive framework of organizational and public (i.e., the state) accountability that has led to increasing concern among social work practitioners and scholars (Spolander et al., 2014; Hasenfeld and Garrow, 2012).

Using recent developments in the social service sector in Hong Kong as an example, this paper critically examines how the new discourse of accountability is introduced and actualized. We argue that the reasons why this new discourse is successfully constructed and operationalized are due to not just the state’s coercive impositions through policy measures, but also the compliance of social service organizations and the social work profession. Subtly, they work together in shaping the issue of accountability in social work services in Hong Kong.

We chose Hong Kong as a case study for two reasons. First, Hong Kong has long been praised as the most prominent free market system in the world (Lin, 2009; DeWolf Smith, 1997). Ironically, as a neoliberal economic showcase, Hong Kong has inherited some critical social policies from its former British imperial master. For instance, Hong Kong has free education up to 12 years. Half of the population lives in government-subsidized housing. A non-contributory low-fee public medical care system is available. Most social services are provided by non-government organizations (NGOs) and have been largely funded by the government. Under the Basic Law, a mini constitution set by the Chinese government to govern the Special Administrative Region (SAR), Hong Kong is
supposed to keep its socio-economic system for fifty years until 2046. However, we notice a major shift in SAR government’s social policies after Hong Kong returning to China.

Second, as one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, both the government and ordinary people in Hong Kong are flexible in adopting ideas from all over the world. We believe the cosmopolitan experience of Hong Kong—where the West meets the East—may offer useful insights for the global social work community, whose members are facing a similar challenge (Spolander et al., 2014). To conclude the paper, we propose some possible strategies for social workers to creatively resist the institutional limitations imposed by the new discourse.

A Brief Recapitulation of Neo-liberalism and New Public Management

The concept of accountability is nothing new to the social work profession, however, today, this term and related policies and practices have been increasingly reformulated within the popular neoliberal discourse. As a retrospective analysis, neoliberalism, which is descended from classical economic liberalism, is seen almost as “inevitable and obvious” historical shift after the economic crises of many Keynesian social economic regimes since the 1980s (Harvey, 2005; George, 1999). Harvey (2005) suggests that proponents of neo-liberalism are interested in, as a political project, “re-establish[ing] the conditions for capital accumulation and to restor[ing] the power of the economic elites” (p. 19). In essence, the neo-liberal political-economic agenda is to protect and extend the freedom of market activities by de-regulating competition, particularly in the labor market, and economic inflation by prohibiting governmental deficits through reducing public
expenditure and shrinking the size of the government on the one hand and privatizing social programs on the other hand (Bourdieu, 1998).

Undoubtedly, the public realm is the epicenter of the neoliberal transformation (Bourdieu, 1998). Disguised under the claims of the responsible use of public resources, neoliberal policies intend to restructure the public realm including both the apparatuses directly controlled by the state and the indirectly manipulated non-governmental third sector. The corporate-like NPM model has been widely adopted to restructure how government does business. Some social policy analysts have argued that the restructuring tends to be along a few major lines (Clarke, 2004; Horton, 2007; Walker, 2002).

First, competition becomes the rule of resource allocation and distribution. The environment for social work practice is no longer understood as the society or the community that they serve but a market that they are competing for (Tsui and Cheung, 2004). Funding for social services has been destabilized through a new and largely competitive contract system. A diversified and increasing number of service providers are brought into the public realm under the notion of market competition (Hasenfeld and Garrow, 2012). The business-like idea of stakeholders is emphasized to (1) allow more flexibility for public organizations to control their resources and staff and (2) weaken their ability to negotiate with the state (Walker, 2002).

Second, cost efficiency is the yardstick for success. Success is measured by quantifiable indicators, mainly in terms of output measures (Hasenfeld and Garrow, 2012). Meanwhile, efficiency is now the only yardstick for performance, and quality of service is equated with standardization and documentation. The main purpose of the system is to
minimize costs and maximize the flexibility of the state in meeting the needs of service users (Heinrich and Choi, 2007; Austin, 2003). The foundation of professional social work relationships is no longer care and concern, but now monetary terms as the best balance of cost and value (Harris and White, 2013).

Third, the public realm is incorporated with a new “business-like” managerial system, which is seen as a commitment to a “rational and ruthless” organizational and policy choice and decision making (Clarke, 2004: 36). Under NPM, social workers are no longer seen as professionals (Tsui and Cheung, 2004). They are just employees under the control (or supervision) of managers, who have assumed a key role in operating the service. Instead of social workers’ tacit and professional knowledge, management theories and models dominate and direct day-to-day practice.

Fourth, as the golden rule of neoliberal ideology, individualism is translated into different forms of individualization (Bourdieu, 1998), which promote personal choice and the freedom to choose. As free individuals, service users are re-positioned from clients (a “passive recipient”) to consumers (an “active choice maker”) (Clarke, 2004; Harris, 1999). Service users, many of whom do not access social service voluntarily or have many choices, are now seen as consumers who are deceptively given the power to “purchase” public services and define the quality of service (Martin and Kettner, 1997; Martin, 1993). As Horton (2007) observed in the Australian neoliberal healthcare system, the term “consumer” has legitimized a “hegemonic acceptance of consumerism,” which justifies and maintains a residual approach to health and social services.
Under these conditions, the professional power of social workers is subject to a new form of public scrutiny. Their “trustworthiness” can only be ensured by a stringent auditing process (Barton, 2008) based on practice and service standards and procedures clearly set to objective outcomes (Banks, 2004). Embracing neoliberal ideology and principles, these standards and outcome measurements constitute a new form of accountability that has been imposed on the social work profession, as well as many other social care and health professions (Healy, 2002; Tsui and Cheung, 2004).

The Practice of the Neoliberal Form of Accountability

One of the major features that delineates the nature of a profession is its emphasis on accountability for providing good service (Clark, 2005). Yet, to the social work profession, the members of which are largely employees of organizations funded by public expenditures, the idea of accountability is highly contestable, particularly under the neoliberal regime. Based on a metric analysis of the power and knowledge dimensions of social welfare (namely, professional, community, managerial, and market discourses) Ife (1997) proposed four competing discourses of accountability of social welfare services. Each has its own interpretation of to whom and how social work should be accountable.

As a professional discourse, social workers are accountable to their clients and profession with an assumption that they share similar values and interests. In a community discourse that treasures the participation of citizens, social workers are seen as community enablers accountable through the democratic decision-making process. In the managerial discourse, social workers have been turned into operators of standardized policies and procedures, and they are accountable to a vertical managerial system. In the market
discourse, social work service is taken as a commodity, and service users are treated as customers. In practice, social workers have a long tradition of seeking a balance between these four discourses.

However, under the neoliberal regime, this balance is easily lost. According to Ife’s analysis (1997), the professional and community discourses are being restrained by the managerial and market discourses, the nature of which fit well with the neoliberal ideology. To a large extent, we can even argue that, under the neoliberal welfare regime, the managerial and market discourses are so magnified that they have synchronized as the dominant discourse governing the routine practice of social workers and minimizing and twisting some valuable elements of the other two discourses. For instance, by equating customers with citizens, the market discourse further justifies and reinforces the managerial ideas and practices that threaten to deprofessionalize the social work profession (Harris, 1999). In turn, conceptually we call this synchronized discourse “the neoliberal discourse of accountability.”

Neoliberal Discourse of Accountability: The Case of Hong Kong

In the following discussion, we use Hong Kong as an example to examine the different multilevel strategies used by the neoliberal discourse of accountability, how they have been used to revamp the social service system, and how they have demoralized the social work profession. Together these different strategies form a web of control that weakens the capacity of the social service system of Hong Kong and curbs the professional autonomy of social work practitioners in a ruthless iron cage of NPM. However, the following discussion is by no means a complete picture of how the neoliberal discourse of
accountability works in Hong Kong. Due to the lack of information, some issues, such as how the code of ethics is complied with (or even being compromised) under the neoliberal discourse, are beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, based on what we gathered in this paper, we hope to make a case for the international social work community to (re)examine the idea of accountability in the neoliberal welfare era.

**Marketizing infrastructure: Revamping the subvention system**

Perhaps the first and foremost piece of evidence of how the neoliberal discourse of accountability has been introduced to Hong Kong is the major revamp of the subvention system through which the government allocates resources to NGOs to provide social services. Disguising the neoliberal ideology of completion and marketization, a new system emphasizing the autonomy of NGOs in managing their own resources has been introduced.

**The obsolete rigid system:** In terms of social services, since the 1960s, Hong Kong has already established a largely government-funded system that is directed by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) and mainly run by NGOs. There has been a strong policy tradition that the SWD is to work in partnership with NGOs to plan programs, develop services, allocate subvention, and monitor service (Lui, 2010). Financially, the SWDs had long funded NGOs through a Standard Cost Subvention (SCS) system that is based on a formula of the actual salary requirements of all required posts designated to the service. The SCS system is based on three principles:

a) Services are planned according to a standard population ratio—for instance, an Integrated Children and Youth Services Centre for every community with a
population of 12,000 people. Service allocations among NGOs are coordinated between the SWD and NGOs.

b) Human resources allocated to different types of social service are standardized in terms of the number of staff, the rank of their position, and seniority. Since 1980s, the ranking and the indexed salary scales of each rank has already been fixed according to the level of professional training (i.e., bachelor degree holders at the social work officer level, diplomas at the social work assistant level, and non-social work trained staff at the welfare assistant level).

c) NGO staff share the same indexed salary scale as civil servants, although they do not enjoy equivalent fringe benefits. Seniority is portable when workers change jobs from one subvented post from one NGO to another similar post of another NGO.

The SCS system, which allowed NGOs and their employed social workers long-term stability, was not without controversy. Very often the allocation of service to NGOs was largely based on previous experience, the agency’s capacity, and coordination. Therefore, even though an auditing system was in place, termination of service was not common. As a result, the SCS system almost turned the government into an unlimited financial guarantor of NGOs, which were criticized as cost ineffective and lacking public accountability (Leung, 2002b). Meanwhile the rigidity of the subvention formula and policies also hampered senior management of NGOs from reallocating resources within the agency and even “managing” their staff. Being tied to a fixed ranking system based on the level of formal social work training, the supply of social workers was limited, which made the
labor market of social workers unfavorably rigid to employers and funders (i.e., the government).

Since the early 1990s, there have already been some suggestions for reviewing the SCS system. In 1995, two years before Hong Kong was handed back to China, the then British colonial government had already hired a management consultant firm to review the SCS system. A few policy documents were published that suggested a major revamp of SCS by incorporating a corporate model. NPM language was used to frame the major recommendations, which were to allow NGOs more flexibility to manage their resources (Leung, 2002b). The idea of flexibility was indeed appealing to many top management members of NGOs who saw that the rigid salary scale and portability of seniority limited their control on resource and staff under the SCS system.

*The marketized flexible system:* When hit hard by the Asian economic crisis in 1997, the new Hong Kong SAR government decided to aggressively put those policy documents into practice. With the support of many agencies’ top management, a new subvention system, the Lump Sum Grant (LSG) System, was introduced. This new system maintains the service-population ratio. The human resource standard is also maintained as the base for funding calculation. However, two major new measures were introduced.

First, the funding formula is no longer indexed to the actual salaries of all employed professional staff designated to the service. Instead of adjusting the annual allocation according to the seniority of the staff, it is now replaced by a mid-point scale. In other words, NGOs can benefit from the surplus if most of their staff’s salary is below the midpoint of the salary scale of the positions that they are assigned to. But they may also
run a risk if the salary of most of their staff have exceeds the midpoint. Under the new system, the management of NGOs is given the autonomy to allocate resources, including salaries, within the lump sum, while the government is no longer the unlimited financial guarantor. However, in the new system, social workers lost the portability of their seniority. In other words, if they change job, they will need to negotiate their salary with the new employer, who very often offer a salary lower than the midpoint of their rank.

Second, under the LSG system, the role of NGOs in Hong Kong has been reduced from partner to contractor. The idea of contracting is based on the logic of cost competition, i.e., the pursuit of value for money (Clarke, 2004). This logic has a huge negative impact on morale in the social service sector in Hong Kong. While the senior management of NGOs enjoys the new autonomy to deploy their resources, there are outcries from the frontline staff who have been treated unfairly under the new system. Many high-paid veteran workers, whose salary has exceeded the midpoint of their rank, have been forced out from work. Newly hired social workers have to negotiate their salary, which is no longer tied to the salary scale of the rank that they are qualified.

Meanwhile, at least for new services, the Hong Kong government has introduced a market-like competitive bidding process. Most new contracts are short-term and non-continued. To bid for this new contact, NGOs have tried to limit their financial commitment by hiring contract and part-time staff to work for these new programs. A two-tier employment system has finally been created that generates mistrust between the management and the staff, as well as between the permanent higher paid staff and the
newly hired contract-based lower-paid staff (Lai and Chan, 2009). So far, the controversy of the LSG system is still very much alive (Cheung, 2011).

**Standardizing the organizational practice of NGOs: Bundling funding and monitoring**

Coming with this new subvention system is also the imposition of a new set of NPM accountability strategies that fit with the embedded contractualism of the neoliberal welfare regime. As Walker (2002) suggests, “contracting systemizes accountability to the extent that the relationship and the responsibilities of the parties are set by the contract.” (p.65) To monitor and regulate this contractual relationship and responsibilities, the new LSG system also comes with a set of standardization policies and measures, which is perhaps the most prominent feature of NPM.

**Standardization:** According to Banks (2004), working for procedures and working for pre-defined standards, targets, outputs, and outcomes are the “two interlinked manifestations of the new accountability” (pp. 152-153). The new LSG system came also with new Service Quality Standards and a series of other service requirements and performance outputs. All NGOs are required to conduct regular self-assessments and external assessments and to have plans in place to improve underperforming items. A total of 16 Service Quality Standards for government-funded services were agreed to between the SWD and NGOs. The SWD also drew up different Funding and Service Agreements (FSAs) in which different sets of assessment criteria and indicators were developed to assess service performance in different service settings (Social Welfare Department, 2012). Managers in NGOs are accountable for executing the function of control to assure that the
services provided are safe, appropriate, productive, and—more importantly—up to standards.

**Self-assessment:** Recently, the SWD also introduced a Service Performance Monitoring System (SPMS) through which the board and chief executive officer of NGOs are explicitly given the mandate to ensure more efficient, customer-focused, accountable and output-driven welfare service delivery. In other words, they are further “empowered” and “pressured” to carry out the neoliberal managerial and market discourses of accountability. Under the SPMS, agencies are required to exercise self-regulatory assessment according to a set of standards, including Essential Service Requirements, Service Quality Standards, Output Standards, and Outcome Standards. Every service unit of government-funded NGOs is required to submit a self-assessment report annually and a half-year report on variance in performance.

**Close monitoring:** As Barton (2008) argues, standardization is an expression of the lack of trust in helping professions to adhere to the accountability requirements of the neoliberal welfare regime. Thus, they should be watched carefully. In Hong Kong, officers from SWD regularly pay review visits (sometimes surprise visits) to NGOs’ service units. SWD will also arrange on-site assessment of service units, which is supposed to identify potential problems in service performance in order to safeguard service quality. Failing to comply with the required improvements will lead to a possible termination of employment at a personal level and/or termination of funding at the organizational level.

**Consumerism:** Adopting the neoliberal re-figuration, social service recipients in Hong Kong have also been recast as “consumers” whose relationship with social service
organizations and social work professionals have been re-scripted. They are now free agents to pursue what they need in the privatized welfare service market through negotiation with professional social workers. In September 2013, the SWD introduced the money-follows-the-user approach to subsidize community care services for seniors. Service users are supported directly by cash vouchers, and they can use these vouchers to purchase services from government-recognized providers, mainly NGOs. This new approach inevitably reshapes social care service as “commodities, objects or packages to be bought and sold” (Dustin, 2007: 31). Social workers and their service users are connected no longer by a professional helping relationship but a buy-and-sell business relationship. The value-for-money principle has become the core essence of social work accountability to their service users.

*Survival in the competitive market: NGOs’ self-initiated strategies*

The new accountability strategies imposed by the government would not be smooth and successful without the voluntary, albeit unintentional, compliance of NGOs. The marketization of social services puts pressure on many NGOs, which must take action to position themselves in the increasingly competitive welfare service market. To be seen as accountable organizations, NGOs have initiated many accountability strategies to assure their quality of services. Vertical managerial systems are put in place to monitor the idiosyncratic discretion of frontline social work professionals.

*Replicating a corporate business model:* Indeed, the new subvention system has also subtly induced a business-like model in the social service sector. For better or worse, the government thinks of corporate governance as a way to indicate good governance of NGOs
and ensure public money is spent wisely. Seeing NGOs as corporate organizations rather than social service organizations opens up the long tradition of hiring social workers as the chief of staff. Despite the duty of overseeing NGO operations, some of the CEOs in medium-sized or large organizations do not even possess social work qualifications to register as a social worker under the Social Workers Registration Ordinance. With noticeable experience and expertise in non-social-work settings, these candidates are accredited by the board members to supervise senior social work managers and run the social work business.

*Dividing manage and managed:* As a trendy approach to demonstrate their corporate image, many NGOs have also uncritically adopted the job titles of the business sector by renaming their job titles from, for example, executive director to chief executive officer, service supervisor to program director, and center-in-charge to manager. These new titles hierarchically re-differentiate the management staff of NGOs from the frontline practitioners. The new managerial titles signify a new power division and dynamic between the manager and the managed. Despite the fact that many managers are professionally trained social workers, they have become bureaucrats whose accountability is measured by their assurance of meeting standards and money well spent. Their target of control is the frontline social workers whose work is no longer evaluated according to the effectiveness of their service but the efficiency in meeting outcome indicators. As a result, there is a growing mistrust between managers and frontline social workers.

*Accreditation:* To be qualified as an organization that is competent and eligible for public support, NGOs appeal to the idea of accreditation, which is a form of auditing to
assure the quality of organizations (Munro, 2004; Tsui and Cheung, 2004). This quality assurance is based on the measurement of pre-set norms and criteria, which are largely derived by an instrumental-rational approach, that are used to assess and accredit NGOs. To ensure that the preset criteria, standards, output, and outcomes are met, the new accountability strategies tend to favor short-term tangible outcomes rather than long-term effects, which are more difficult to assess.

In Hong Kong, some NGOs have even established an independent audit department to safeguard their internal quality control. They hire in-house auditors to conduct risk assessments and carry out internal audits to detect, correct, and prevent errors inasmuch as they have the obligation to reduce risks and identify potential irregularities. Evaluation for good practice is based largely on performance indicators. Social work managers in Hong Kong have increasingly used assessment tools from the business sector, such as benchmarks, key performance indicators (Leung, 2002a), balanced scorecards (Yeung and Connell, 2006), and return on investment (Kee and Chiu, 2013) to measure the effectiveness of welfare services.

Consequences of the Neoliberal Accountability Discourse in Hong Kong

Tensions between Managers and Frontline Social Workers

The strategic practice of the neoliberal discourse of accountability has caused detrimental effects on the social work field in Hong Kong. The business-like organizational structure and the two-tier employment system have split social work professionals within individual NGOs and within the profession. The government-imposed and self-initiated strategies generate endless documentation, reporting, regular monitoring
visits, and surprise monitoring visits. They have overwhelmingly driven the social work trained managers away from the core concern of professional social work practice and service (i.e., the wellbeing of the clients and the staff). Instead, they are busy generating and promoting different administrative checks and balances to avoid mistakes and improper behaviors that may jeopardize funding. In doing so, frontline professionals are disempowered (Lam and Blyth, 2014). Their exercise of professional judgement in making contingent and contextual decision is curbed.

By adopting the opinions from experts in the business sector—such as financial controllers, auditors, and human resource managers—managerial decisions are further tilted towards a rational and ruthless business model. These decisions further intensify the tensions between the management trained in social work trained and frontline social work professionals who are supposed to adhere to the same code of ethics and social justice principle of the social work profession. It has been long observed that one of the most difficult challenges faced by social work managers is to impose control on their subordinate professionals in a positive, healthy, productive, and humanistic manner (Weinbach and Lynn, 1994). As the neoliberal discourse of accountability continues infiltrating the social service field in Hong Kong, this challenge has already been reflected in the low morale and high mistrust among frontline social work practitioners.

**Deprofessionalization and low professional morale**

The work of professionals relies heavily on discretion that is difficult to standardize. Like what happened in the United Kingdom (Kirkpatrick et al., 2005), social workers in Hong Kong have reported perverse impositions on their professional autonomy under the
different strategies of neoliberal discourse of accountability. Furthermore, social workers have experienced deterioration of their relationships with service users who are now positioned as consumers. When examining the impact of the New Right’s attack on social citizenship in Britain, Harris suggested that the idea of shifting clientelism to consumerism deserves some merit for the social work profession (Harris, 1999). From an anti-oppressive perspective, it is paramount to recognize and empower service recipients as active and autonomous agents to negotiate their rights and service needs with the social work professionals.

However, under the neoliberal discourse of accountability, frontline social workers are turned into a storefront sale of a department stall or a teller of a bank. Externally, they are expected to loyally deliver a service, even if that service is inadequate for their customer according to pre-set standards and procedures. Meanwhile, they often face customers’ unrealistic expectations due to misinformation about the nature, the adequacy of, and their right to the service publicly promoted by the social service organizations and the state, which are eager to “sell” the underfunded service.

Internally, frontline workers, who are seen as untrustworthy and must be closely monitored by a hierarchy of supervision, are organizationally disempowered to respond contingently to the individual needs of the customer. In turn, in the neoliberal discourse, frontline social workers are positioned in a peculiar position directly against the interest of customers of social service. Indeed, recently there has been a noticeable increase in complaints filed by social service customers against frontline social workers in Hong Kong.
The increasing complaints have further demoralized the frontline workers, who are now hesitant to use professional judgement and instead seek refuge in policies and procedures.

Meanwhile, in the new LSG subvention system, the rank of a position is dissociated from the professional qualifications of social workers. To many social workers, this dissociation is an institutional attack on the professional status of the social work profession. Throughout the years, the two professional bodies - the Hong Kong Social Workers Association and the Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union - representing social workers in Hong Kong, have regularly issued position papers and statements to point out the detrimental effects of the LSG system on the morale, attrition and high turnover of professionally trained social workers. Meanwhile, numerous protests and movements against the new subvention scheme were organized. However, their attempts have been futile without the support of their employers, i.e., NGOs.

Conversely, there is a strong consensus among board members and senior management of NGOs to comply with not only the new subvention system but also its bundled set of accountability strategies. Their attitude can be reflected by the position of the Hong Kong Council of Social Services (HKCSS), the umbrella organization of NGOs, as stated in its letter to the new Director of SWD. In the letter, it was said, “the Lump Sum Grant subvention system offers NGOs higher autonomy, which lets them flexibly deploy resources and restructure services and makes timely adjustments for the continuously changing needs in the society” (HKCSS, 2013: 1, Translation is authors'). While urging for a comprehensive review of the LSG system and development of a sustainable social service system, the HKCSS’s concern is largely about how to ensure its member agencies...
(not social workers) to have a reasonable baseline funding and a flexibility in deploying resources and surplus.

Indeed, so far, we have not identified any public document which indicates that the senior management of NGOs has urged for the abolition of this new system which gives them more control of their budget and staff. Instead, after the introduction of the LSG subvention scheme, many agencies have also undergone a human resource management “reform” that is aimed on the one hand at cutting budgets for salaries and on the other hand at expanding services units and headcounts. Their priority is given to their “corporate scale” rather than their “service mandate.” As Lai and Chan (2009) have observed, the new subvention system and its accountability strategies have negatively affected the morale of the social work profession in Hong Kong.

Losing the mission and function of advocacy

The strategic practice of the neoliberal discourse of accountability has also jeopardized the social work profession’s basic values of social justice as indicated in the Code of Practice for Registered Social Workers issued by the Social Workers Registration Board (1998). Traditionally a major role of social work and NGOs is to advocate for the marginalized, which is a key measure to remedy the injustice of the state’s policies. Drawing upon the experiences in the United Kingdom, Payne (2000) suggests that advocacy is also the solution to the ill effects of bureaucratic inflexibility and managerialism in social work. However, as has been found in Hong Kong, Payne’s suggestion may be too optimistic. The strategies used by the neoliberal accountability discourse have weakened the mandate of the social work profession. They also depoliticize
the civil society function of NGOs. NGOs are now positioned as merely a service mechanism of the state. To survive in the highly audited and competitive service market, CEOs and board members of NGOs are less likely to adopt the social work advocacy role for clients. More importantly, they hesitate to support (or even encourage) their staff to do so.

**Findings Alternative Ways to Resist the Discourse**

What has been happening in Hong Kong’s social service sector may not be new to social workers in many countries that are also dominated by the neoliberal discourse of accountability. However, the development of the neoliberalized social service model in Hong Kong may further explain how the neoliberal discourse of accountability works. As reflected in the experience of the social service sector in Hong Kong, this discourse is not solely actualized by the measures that different states have imposed and that have engendered a social and institutional atmosphere that appeals or pushes NGOs to, willingly or unwillingly, adopt these neoliberal discourses. To survive within this neoliberal welfare regime, NGOs, which tend to rely heavily on state funding, have also initiated measures that reinforce the neoliberal agenda. To a certain extent, the prevalence of this discourse has almost become a form of hegemony.

The question now to the social work profession is how to resist, if possible, this neoliberal discourse of accountability. To break this hegemony, the social work profession will need to be persistent and creative. We suggest that the resistance should include multiple strategies at different levels.

*Strategic alliance with service users*
At the frontline level, we need to rebuild a strategic alliance between social workers and their service recipients. Strategically, social workers should be critically reflexive of this peculiar position and try not to fall into the “customer-against-me” mentality. At the level of individual interactions, social workers may make use of their limited intervention space to help their customers understand better the institutional deficiencies that cause their problems in accessing service. Instead of referring them to internal appeals or complaint procedures, we can connect them with consumer advocacy groups, which is one way to show service recipients that we are on their side.

The peculiar side effect of neoliberal consumerism is the rise of consumer advocacy groups. For instance, in Hong Kong, many consumers—including patients, advocacy groups, and interest groups—have been established in the last two decades (Chan, 2009; Mok, 2004). Under the neoliberal accountability discourse, these groups may be seen as watchdogs that may criticize not only the service organization, but also individual practitioners that deliver service on the frontlines. From an empowerment perspective, social workers should recognize the rights and needs of these groups and their criticalness. Working with consumer advocacy groups can be a useful strategy. The question is how to help them better understand the system and make the right attack on systemic deficiency. Social workers, who know better how the system works, should consider working with them both in official (if possible) or informal capacities.

If no advocacy group is available, social workers can go back to the basics—linking personal trouble to social problems—by bringing service recipients together to form their own self-advocacy/self-help group. This is what Barber (1995) has called
“politically progressive casework.” Only when service recipients realize that it is not just them having trouble accessing service through individual social workers will they know that they are facing an institutional not personal blockage.

Reflexive Practice: Education and Self organizing

The internal monitoring system of NGOs has become more and more sophisticated and tedious. However, it is hard to accept the fact that professionals are left with no institutional gap to make professional discretion to break rules (i.e., pre-set standards and procedures) in order to maximize the (tangible and intangible) well-being of their service recipients. What we have seen in Hong Kong is not that social workers are stripped of their autonomy to make professional discretions. Instead, the continuous auditing, monitoring, and performance evaluation strategies imposed by the neoliberal discourse have exhausted the energy of many frontline social workers. Meanwhile, some social workers have been unconsciously indoctrinated into the neoliberal hegemony that resources are scarce and that they need to be the gatekeeper to control the greedy undeserved. This is particularly true when are in direct confrontation with “consumers” who know how to make use of the system loopholes to advocate for themselves.

Therefore, it is important for social workers to stay reflexively critical of their roles and positions in the neoliberal welfare regime. Reflexivity does not come naturally. It needs to be nurtured. Social work education plays an imperative role in nurturing this kind of reflexive critical lens. There is ample literature on how to teach students to be reflexive and critical. Equipping social work students with this lens is the first step to prepare them
to resisting the neoliberal discourse of accountability in the field after they graduate. However, how to keep the frontline social workers be reflexive can be challenging.

Peer support is critical. Resisting the neoliberal discourse of accountability is tiresome and frustrating. Social workers need support from their likeminded peers. The role of professional associations is certainly critical. However, under the neoliberal discourse of accountability, social workers are so organizationally divided in the field that it has become a challenge for traditional professional associations to function as an effective mechanism for frontline social workers to resist the neoliberal discourses in their daily practice. In Hong Kong some social workers have organized themselves into small groups to provide mutual support and a space for venting (Leung, 2013). However most of these small groups operate in isolation. It is critical to connect them and form a larger movement. We will need studies to find out how these groups are formed and sustained.

**Conclusion**

The neoliberal discourse of accountability has dominated the social service fields in different parts of the world. The paper has demonstrated the strategic practices of how this discourse incorporates managerialism and market-consumerism into the social service sector of Hong Kong. Being marginalized in the new discourse, social workers are now under micro-management and act as reactive agents to deliver remedial social services with prescribed standards and procedures. They are no longer seen as professionals; they have become operators. Resisting this neoliberal discourse is not easy, but it is not impossible. To work against the main current of neoliberalism, social workers will need to reflexively
use multiple strategies, however small, at different levels to maximize the well-being of their clients.
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