QSW

Approaching uncertainty in social work education, a lesson from COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic intensified feelings of uncertainty about the future. Although uncertainty is not a new phenomenon for social workers, the uncertainty that has been produced due to COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented. Hence, there is a further requirement for the integration of uncertainty in social work education and practice. Social work education should play a pivotal part in articulating and developing knowledge to respond to uncertain circumstances. Therefore, social work educators should be prepared to include uncertainty in curriculum development and pedagogical approaches. Also, collective actions should be central in social work efforts to face uncertainty and disruptions that target the most vulnerable people and populations.

Keywords

Uncertainty, social work education, social work practice, ethics, COVID-19 pandemic

I had just begun teaching 'Working in uncertainty' to social work students in an Australian university when the emergence of COVID-19 changed the way we lived and worked almost overnight. The pandemic intensified feelings of uncertainty about how the future would look like in Australia, especially as Australia had just experienced some of the worst bushfires ever during 2019–2020 summer.

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On a global level, there are also many uncertainties, with Harari (2018) calming that the 21st century is one of the most uncertain time in human history. Hence, social workers must be equipped to respond to the consequences of uncertainties which will inevitably arise in their practice. Social work education plays a crucial part in articulating and developing knowledge to respond to uncertain circumstances. The way in which we understand uncertainty will direct our dialogues and actions to address the complexity and ambiguity of the world that we are heading.

Uncertainty itself is not a new phenomenon for social workers who often practice in situations where events are open to interpretations. Social workers often face emotional and uncertain situations, which may not be answered easily and straightforward (Taylor and White, 2006). Furthermore, they may feel pressured to make rapid decisions when it would be better to take time to consider other possibilities.

Uncertainty produces different outcomes, depending on how social workers deal with those situations. One outcome can be an increase in competitiveness and fear of risk, which may lead to greater self-protection, narrowness, rigidity and social intolerance. However, Fook (2013) argued that 'vulnerability' of uncertainty could be approached positively through the openness for creativity. So, while uncertainty might lead to a negative response such as fear and anxiety, it may also produce hope and optimism.

Understanding and exploring uncertainty

Critical social work demands the need for looking at the world through an uncertain lens. Social work undertakes uncertainty in knowledge refereeing to the postmodern ideology that suggests universal 'truth' is no longer dependable (Fook, 2016; Morley et al., 2019). Hence, a postmodern lens suggests that we should embrace uncertainty as a natural element of professional work and practice.

Spafford et al. (2007) describe uncertainties as situations that are complex, ambiguous, and unpredictable, along with inconsistent information. In a world that has many uncertain domains, we may need to adapt as we obtain further knowledge and understandings of new situations. Perhaps, existing evidence-based theories and current social work knowledge are no longer enough to analyse those uncertain domains and to prepare social workers to work under radical and unprecedented changes in the future. Obtaining and including relevant knowledge, however, is not an easy process as the world is full of irrelevant information (Harari, 2016). At the same time, being ignorant and resistant to multidisciplinary knowledge and approach will impede leading the discussion of uncertainty. Hence, recognising and articulating areas that need explorations and analyses through a multidisciplinary approach is paramount in social work education. Social work can no longer afford resistance to deal with changes and uncertainties; rather, there is a need to move toward framing uncertainty as positive opportunities for creativity, innovation, and flexibility (Fook, 2013). Therefore, I will approach

uncertainty as an opportunity to explore new possibilities, collaborations, and innovations in social work education.

Social workers tend to use theories that are ethically and morally strong to inform practice (Harms and Connolly, 2019). However, the reality of uncertainty is that previous theories may not be applicable. Developing theories and knowledge needs considering uncertain domains (Harms and Connolly, 2019), although including uncertainty, might be an additional burdensome for knowledge development. In a world which is fluid, less certain and diverse, and can be interpreted differently (Howe, 2009), developing knowledge should include uncertain domains for future practice.

For me, uncertainty is an undeniable aspect of social work education and knowledge-building in the 21st century. Global unprecedented changes, including climate change, technological advances, globalisation, and uncertain job market, have already impacted social work practice and education. COVID-19 has impacted domains that were already affected by uncertainties and made them even more complex, ambiguous, and intertwined. These include already unsustainable job markets, concerns about monitoring and surveillance of citizens by governments, unequal access to information, and health disparities. The pandemic further triggered unemployment, marginalisation, mental health and domestic violence around the world (UN News, 2020). Hence, in the world that has many uncertain areas, we need profound and deep understandings of interconnectedness of uncertain areas to echo the reality of the world that we are heading. Albeit, there are still debates about how the future will look like; certainly, the future will be much different.

Social work knowledge transformation in a time of uncertainty

Uncertainty is also an undeniable aspect of contemporary higher education with unprecedented changes and uncertainties having resulted in volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) (Waller et al., 2019). At the same time, higher education providers need to determine how to face ongoing uncertain situations, building relevant knowledge and leading innovations. COVID-19 was a reminder of how uncertainty would look like and why higher education should be prepared for uncertainty in curriculum development and pedagogical approaches.

Social work pedagogical approaches also need to acknowledge ongoing uncertainty as a crucial part of the future plan. Social work education should work along with uncertainty and be prepared to face multiple and differing interpretations and unpredictable outcomes (Fook, 2013). Also, at the time of immediate uncertainty, there is no clear map to follow, so rather than wait for definitive directions, we may need to embrace changes quickly and revise later if necessary. As such, I should be a part of the immediate action in responding to uncertainty in social work education constructively.

Including uncertainty across the curriculum requires new forms of guidance and directions. As such, social work educators might be unsure about their professional judgments, confidence and knowledge, and they are more likely to feel

incompetent. I believe that social work educators, including myself, should look at uncertainty in a broader concept rather than personal deficits and incompetency. To reach this, we need ongoing critical thinking and constant negotiations in approaching uncertainties and relative dilemmas (Zeiger, 2019). Transferring knowledge in an uncertain world also requires more tolerance and openness to different perspectives with relevant awareness and knowledge. Social work educators must ensure students are able to critically reflect on uncertain situations which seems an inevitable aspect of practice in the future. Reisch (2013) also argues that we should recognise our limitations in social work education in future. Hence, exploring the limitations of our social work education in approaching new areas of uncertainties will be an ongoing part of my career as a social work academic.

Many frontline social workers experienced challenges of working under the uncertainty of COVID-19 for which their education had not adequately prepared them. Leung et al. (2007) who explored social work responses to 2003 SARS outbreak in Hong Kong suggested that the 'personhood' aspect of social work profession should be developed to being prepared to work under uncertain situations. They further emphasised that social work educators should be facilitating students' abilities to explore questions and obtain new knowledge and encourage them in ongoing training in their practice after graduation. This might require changes in educators' understandings of their role as no longer being a dispenser of knowledge. Social work practitioners should be prepared to engage in ongoing explorations, reflections and negotiations (Leung et al., 2007). Therefore, we must find appropriate ways of building the notion of risk and uncertainty into the social work curriculum and create a process that engenders a dialogic and reflective process. We need to prepare our students for reflexive processes as a crucial strategy in facing uncertainties.

Social work students should get an opportunity during their studies to learn how to approach and deal with uncertainty. Blackman and Featherstone (2015) believed that trust is an important element in a time of uncertainty. I feel this is my responsibly to enhance trust between myself, my students, and peers. As educators, we need to be honest with students in discussing complexity and ambiguity and exploring examples where problems cannot be explained or resolved in clear, measurable, and calculative ways. There is why discussing uncertainty and critically analysing practice might be equally or more important than the distribution of solid knowledge. This is particularly important as social workers often use the intelligence of their emotions in their decision-making, which demands powerful critical skills and awareness of uncertainty.

Maintaining social work values, ethics and social justice in an uncertain world

Uncertainty and associated changes may lead to conflict and ongoing disruptions and frustrations at a global level and challenge universal values and ethics

(Reisch, 2013). Maintaining values in facing uncertainty needs boosting international collaborations and efforts that can enhance collective actions among social workers. Acting quickly and building collaborations may not be easy at the time of crisis; however, this is necessary to move forward.

Social workers should also be vigilant about who might be impacted the most in the time of uncertainty. They should recognise disadvantaged people that experience more negative consequences during uncertainty, given their vulnerable circumstances, social exclusion and financial hardships. For instance, while domestic violence has been escalated in COVID-19 era by self-isolation, women with disabilities and women from migrant and refugee backgrounds and other hard to reach population were more likely to be vulnerable to domestic violence (Segrave and Maher, 2020). Therefore, collective actions and international advocacy should be central in social work efforts to address uncertainty and support the most vulnerable people around the world. Thus, as a social work academic, I need to be proactive in identifying vulnerable groups of our society and making recommendations to support them immediately.

Although valuing social justice and social change are well embedded in social work training, particularly in critical social work (Weiss-Gal and Gal, 2019), we need to advocate further for those who are already disadvantaged and disfranchised at the time of global crisis. Advocating for social justice seems critical in the time of uncertainty, as ethical principles can be seriously challenged or ignored (Taylor and White, 2006). In COVID-19 crisis, the world witnessed life-and-death decisions in hospitals, as doctors and health care workers in some countries, had to decide between younger and older patients without specific ethical guidelines other than survival of the fittest. Also, some countries that cared about human rights considered herd immunity as an option to face the pandemic. In this unprecedented and uncertain situation, some values of human dignity and equality have been challenged or forgotten (Kenny and Connors, 2017). Social work values and ethics might also be challenged by uncertainties. Social work professional boundaries might be crossed as social workers need to act outside the usual scope of practice (Barsky, 2020). At the time of COVIC-19, I was not prepared to respond to students' question on how to handle ethical dilemmas produced by the global pandemic. So, I need to be a part of developing further arguments in the social work curriculum on how to deal with these situations ethically.

Taylor and White (2006) argued that we should acknowledge the importance of emotion and interpretations of ethics at the time of crisis and develop strategies to deal with them. That is why we, social work educators, need to discuss which areas of ethical guidelines can change in the time of uncertainty and how to critically reflect on resisting injustice of social and political system against those who have already disfranchised and socially excluded.

I believe social work, like many other disciplines, will increasingly face uncertainty in education, practice and ethical domains. As a social work academic, I can play a crucial role in integrating uncertainty in social work curriculum and leading

understanding of uncertainty to enhance creativity and innovation while maintaining ethical.

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