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Review article

Research agenda of Hong Kong teachers' emotional experiences at work

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ABSTRACT

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In recent years, it seems that teachers in Hong Kong feel negatively about their work. To some extent, the negative emotional experiences may not only affect teachers' well-being, but also the quality of schooling. Thus, it is necessary for us to pay attention to the phenomenon of teachers' emotional experiences, especially the negative ones. In the literature, researchers have investigated teachers' emotional experiences from the psychological perspective. Nevertheless, the psychological perspective may neglect the social impacts on teachers' emotional experiences. The limitation may create an incomplete or inaccurate understanding about the phenomenon. In order to overcome the limitation, this article proposes a sociological research agenda for further investigation on the basis of symbolical interactionism.

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1. Introduction

In the recent years, Hong Kong teachers seem to experience a lot of negative feelings and emotions at work. For example, the Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers (2011a) find that near 30% of the teachers in Hong Kong is unhappy at work and near 60% of them perceive teaching is a less rewarding occupation than before.

Other studies report a high rate of dissatisfaction, stress and burnout among Hong Kong teachers (Chan, 2011; Choi and Tang, 2009; Lee, Tsang, and Kwok, 2007). According to Cheng (2009), 50% of Hong Kong teachers experience the feelings of powerlessness and stress at work; over 25% of Hong Kong teachers were depressive and anxious; and between 37% and 56% have considered resigning from the profession. Studies show that the percentage of unhappy teachers in Hong Kong has been increasing (Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). Accordingly, the negative emotional experiences of teachers are a serious phenomenon in Hong Kong. Researchers have demonstrated that negative emotional experiences may not only affect teachers' well-being, but also the quality of teaching and schooling (Corcoran and Tormey, 2012; Day and Qing, 2009; Sutton, 2005; Sutton and Wheatley, 2003). Thus, this is necessary for us to pay attention to the phenomenon of teachers' emotional experiences at work in Hong Kong, especially the negative ones.

In order to improve the situation described above, education researchers have been enthusiastic to investigate Hong Kong teachers' emotional experiences from psychological perspective, such as the theories of teacher stress, satisfaction, and burnout. To some extent, these studies tend to attribute the causes of negative emotions to teachers' psychological factors like personality trait, copying strategies, emotional intelligence, and the like. For example, Mo (1991) finds that Hong Kong secondary school teachers' emotional exhaustion may positively relate to Type A personality. Chan, Chen and Chong (2010) point out the inadequate copying strategies of teachers may relate to their work stress. Similarly, Leung (1994) argues that teacher stress, anxiety, and depression in Hong Kong may be resulted from the stress management skills. Other studies, according to Chan (2011), added other psychological variables that may relate to teachers' stress and burnout in Hong Kong, including hardiness, emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and diarchic abilities.

Although the psychological research offers some explanations of teachers' negative emotional experiences at work in Hong Kong, the explanations tend to attribute the problems to individual teachers, such as their inaccurate personality traits, emotional intelligence, and copying strategies, rather than social forces (Zembylas, 2003). In other words, the investigation of teachers' emotional experiences needs consider how teachers' emotional experiences at work are socially constructed; otherwise the investigation may be incomplete. As Tsang (2012, pp. 84) notes, "the large number of teachers who have been found to be unhappy and dissatisfied suggest that negative emotional experiences in teaching goes behind individual factors and has become a social issue." Thus, sociological imagination is required to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to propose a sociological research agenda for the further research on Hong Kong teachers' emotional experiences at work. Symbolic interactionism is used as a core perspective to frame the entire discussion in this article. The reason to adopt this sociological perspective rather than others is that symbolic interactionism is the primary perspective influencing many sociological studies on emotions (Burke, 2004; Burkitt, 1997; MacKinnon, 1994; Rosenberg, 1990; Shott, 1979; Stryker, 2004). Moreover, this sociological perspective to some extent takes account of both social and psychological impacts on emotions and feelings, so this perspective may offer a more comprehensive account to understand teachers' emotional experiences at work (Tsang, 2012).

This article will first provide a sociological understanding of teachers' emotional experiences at work. The second section will propose a theoretical framework. On the basis of the proposed framework, a research agenda will be recommended at the end of this article.

2. Teachers' emotional experiences at work

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective that studies human group lives and conducts at the level of social interaction. The major premise of symbolic interactionism is that social actors act on the basis of their interpretation or definition of the self and the situation (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2010; Stryker, 1980). That means social actors can reflectively monitor their actions in terms of the meanings they make for themselves and the situation. Symbolic interactionists further suggest that the interpretation of the self and the situation does not only affect how social actors act, but also how they feel (Burke, 2004; Denzin, 1984; MacKinnon, 1994; Rosenberg, 1990; Shott, 1979; Stryker, 2004; Turner, 2007). A positive interpretation of the self and the situation arouses positive emotions, while a negative interpretation of the self and the situation arouses negative emotions (MacKinnon, 1994; Stryker, 2004; Turner, 2007). Denzin (1984) refers the aroused emotions to lived experiences and self-feelings, because the aroused emotions are the feelings or sentiments social actors consciously experience and feel. Moreover, symbolic interactionists claim that emotional experiences or emotions are motivating forces that

shape social actions and interactions (Turner and Stets, 2005). As Collins (1990, 2004) demonstrates, positive emotional experiences between two persons will drive the persons to commit to the relationship, but negative emotional experiences will motivate them to avoid further interactions with each other.

Accordingly, teachers' emotional experiences at work are the feelings which the teachers consciously feel and experience at work. If they interpret their work positively, positive emotional experiences at work may be aroused; otherwise, they may encounter negatively emotional experiences at work. Moreover, teachers' positive emotional experiences may become the source of their job commitment and motivation, but their negative emotional experiences may become the threat. As Choi and Tang (2011) illustrate, teachers with job satisfaction tend to have a higher sense of job commitment than teachers with job dissatisfaction.

3. A sociological framework

According to the above discussion, Hong Kong teachers' emotional experiences are related to teachers' interpretation of their work. How do the teachers interpret their work? Studies in other countries illustrate that teachers are inclined to interpret their work with the purposes or values they hold in teaching (Sutton, 2005; Tsang, 2012). The studies suggest that many teachers commit to teach because they aspire to facilitate students' academic, social, and moral growth (Connell, 1985; Hargreaves, 2003; Kelchtermans, 1996; Lam, 2011; Lasky, 2005; Oplatka, 2007; Woods, 1999). To some extent, the teaching purpose may become the object of their behaviors by which they reflexively monitor their practices in teaching in order to fulfill the purpose (Tsang, 2012). Therefore, the studies show that many teachers tend to prefer to do instructional work such as classroom teaching rather than administrative work such as documentation, because they perceive the former is more able to facilitate them to make progress towards their teaching purpose than the latter (Ball, 2003; Hargreaves, 2003; Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid, and Shacklock, 2000). When they interpret they can fulfill the purpose in teaching, they may feel positively, such as satisfaction, meaningfulness, and self-fulfillment; otherwise, they may feel negatively, dissatisfaction, meaninglessness, and alienation (Sutton, 2005; Tsang, 2012).

However, teachers are not free from any social constraint that conditions their practices in teaching and in turn their emotional experiences at work (Kelchtermans, 2011). A significant and well-documented social constraint is education reforms. Education researchers have argued that the recent education reforms in Hong Kong is based on managerialism which introduces many managerialist concepts such as quality assurance, accountability, and inspection to the Hong Kong education system (Mok, Wilding, Chan, and Tse, 1998; Tse, 2005). Based on the managerialist framework, the Hong Kong government had not hesitated to implement many reform initiatives since the late 1990s, such as Quality Assurance Inspection in 1997, School Based Management in 2000, School Self Evaluation and External School Review in 2003 (Tse, 2005). These reforms have great impacts on teachers' work. The most important impact should be the intensification of teachers' work. According to the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (2010), Hong Kong teachers' workload has been increasing since the new wave of education reform in 2000. For instance, the union indicates that teachers nowadays need to respond to 80 duties on average and work for 60-70 hours per week. The reason of the work intensification is that the managerialist education reform tends to create new responsibilities to teachers (Apple, 1986; Connell, 1995; Hargreaves, 1992; OECD, 2005; Woods, 1999). For example, studies conducted by Brown (1997), Cheung and Kan (2009), and Leung and Chan (2001) respectively demonstrate that the SBM reform in Hong Kong requests teachers to take more administrative and managerial responsibilities in schools such as preparations of school annual planning and reports. As a result, the teachers need to spend most of the time on administrative work like documentation, staff meeting, school evaluation and the like. The heavy administrative workload does not only reduce teachers' leisure causing work stress, emotional exhaustion and burnout (Lee, et al., 2007; Tang and Yeung, 1999), more importantly, but also less time for instructional work. Therefore, the teachers may be dissatisfied with and unhappy about the education reforms because they may think the reforms create a lot of administrative work which is unrelated to teaching and learning and even affect the quality of teaching and learning (Lai and Lo, 2007; O'Brien and Down, 2002; Smyth, et al., 2000).

Another essential social constraint is school administration. Researchers have claimed that school administration is more or less bureaucratic (Ingersoll, 2003; Tyler, 1988). Bureaucracy is an administrative system emphasizing rationality and impersonality. The administrative system may bring negative emotional outcomes to employees, because the system may overlook employees' desires and interests at work (Volti, 2008). Sociologists suggest that the characteristics of bureaucracy, such as hierarchy and centralization of power and authority, will

break a work process into minute segments and centralize the decision-making power in the top of hierarchy. Employees can only respond to a piece of work without any control over the goals and whole labor process of the work defined by the organization. The separation of conception from execution may be a problem for professionals like teachers, because the organizational goals may be contradictory to the work purposes of the professionals (Apple, 1982; Braverman, 1974; Derber, 1982). However, since they are employed by bureaucracy, their purposes ultimately become subordinate to the organizational goals. For example, Ball (2003) and Hargreaves (2003) show that teachers always are forced by the school administrators to do a lot of administrative work, such as documentation and school exhibitions and promotions, and the teachers tend to experience strong negative feelings about doing the work because they think the work only services the school administrative goals rather than their own purpose of teaching. Thus, Merton (1968) predicts that professionals, including teachers, may ultimately experience a series of frustration at work, because they are forced to do some things that they disvalue but they cannot reject to do by bureaucracy. Orthodox Marxism and neo-Marxism refer the series of frustration to the feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, self-estrangement, and alienation (Blauener, 1964; Braverman, 1974; Erikson, 1990; Seeman, 1959; Swain, 2012).

In addition, the social relation between teachers and parents may be another social constraint (Kelchtermans, 2005). Nowadays, teachers in Hong Kong need to frequently interact with parents. Nevertheless, some teachers report that they feel unhappy about the teacher-parent interactions and relations (Choi and Tang, 2009, 2011). One possible reason is that teachers and parents may have different definitions and expectations of teachers' work. For example, parents may perceive teachers' work as a service-like occupation and thus expect that teachers need to satisfy their demands and expectations; on the other hand, teachers may view their work as a professional that aims to facilitate students to learn and grow, so they may expect that parents should respect and support them (Hargreaves, 2001; Lasky, 2000). However, the definitions and expectations may be contradictory to each other and the contradiction may become a constraint to teachers to work. For instance, studies show that teachers may perceive that their freedom and autonomy in classrooms and schools are reduced by the parents who always demand teachers to do something to students or who have so many complaints about the schools and teachers (Hargreaves and Lasky, 2004; Lasky, 2000). Therefore, many teachers feel frustrated under this situation.

Accordingly, teachers may interpret their work according to the purposes they hold in teaching. The purposes may become the object of their social action that aims to fulfill the purposes. If they interpret they can fulfill their purposes in teaching, they will feel positively; otherwise, they will feel negatively. Nevertheless, there are some social constraints on their practices in teaching and in turn on the fulfillment of their teaching purposes so that it may be easy for them to experience negative emotions and feelings at work.

4. Conclusion and research agenda

It seems that teachers in Hong Kong become more unhappy and dissatisfied with their work in recent years. The negative emotional experiences of teachers may not only affect teachers' well-being, but also the quality of teaching and schooling. In Hong Kong, education researchers generally understand this phenomenon from psychological perspective. The major weakness of this perspective is the neglect of social impacts on teachers' negative emotions. However, emotional experiences are a socially constructed phenomenon (Kemper, 1981; Lupton, 1998; Thoits, 1989), so the neglect may make any investigation on teachers' emotional experiences incomplete.

In order to overcome the limitation of existing literature, this article suggests a sociological framework for further investigation. On the basis of symbolic interactionism, the framework notes that teachers' emotional experiences aroused by their interpretation whether their work can fulfill their purposes in teaching. If they interpret what they do are divergent from their purposes in teaching, they may feel negatively; otherwise, they may feel positively (Sutton, 2005; Tsang, 2012). According to the previous studies in other countries, the major purpose the teachers hold may be to facilitate students' academic, social, and moral development (Connell, 1985; Hargreaves, 2003; Kelchtermans, 1996; Lasky, 2005; Lortie, 1975). However, it is questioned whether it is the same in Hong Kong. Recent research suggests that many Hong Kong people choose or commit to teach because of extrinsic reasons, such as salary and social reputation (Lai, Chan, Ko, and So, 2005; Lam, 2011; Lam and Yan, 2011). In fact, the extrinsic reasons have been reported as a major source of teacher job satisfaction (Dinham and Scott, 2000; Latham, 1998). Therefore, we should first understand what kind of purposes Hong Kong teachers hold in teaching. It also notes that teachers are not free from any social constraint to fulfill their purposes. The education

reforms, school administration, and teacher-parent relations may be some potential social constraints affecting teachers' work and emotions in the Hong Kong education system, as described above. However, the social constraints may not be limited to these three. Thus, we should also explore what social constraints Hong Kong teachers may encounter when they attempt to fulfill their purposes in teaching. Moreover, the social constraints may not function alone. Theoretically, they may interact with one another and then affect teachers' emotional experiences. For example, education researchers have demonstrated that the recent managerialist education reforms in Hong Kong tend to bureaucratize school administration (Cheung and Kan, 2009; Leung, 2003; Leung and Chan; Pang, 2002) and tend to enhance the power of parents which challenge teachers' professional identity (Lai and Lo, 2007). Therefore, we should also be aware of the interactive effects of the social constraints while studying teachers' emotional experiences at work. Accordingly, we should consider the following sets of questions in further research on teachers' emotional experiences in Hong Kong.

- What are the purposes they hold in teaching? How do the purposes affect their practice in schools and their interpretation of their work? To what extent do the teachers perceive that they can fulfill their teaching purposes?
- How is the working condition of Hong Kong teachers? Does administrative work occupy most of their time in schools? Are the schools of teachers bureaucratic? How is the relation between them and parents? What are and how do education policies and reforms influence their work and working condition? How do they interpret their work and working condition?
- What are the social constraints affecting the fulfillment of their teaching purposes and also the emotional experiences of Hong Kong teachers? How do the social constraints interact with one another and then influence teachers' emotional experiences at work?
- What emotions Hong Kong teachers experience at work? And why?

In-depth qualitative studies may be particularly helpful in answering these questions, because the methods can provide us a deeper understanding about teachers' interpretations of teachers' work, working condition, and social constraints and about how the interpretations influence their action and emotions in schools (Tsang, 2012). Indeed, various qualitative methods can be used depending on the research purposes. For example, life history method may be suitable for the researchers who want to study the pattern of teachers' emotional experiences throughout their careers (Goodson and Sikes, 2001); if researchers attempt to understand in detail how teachers feel in particular school settings, they may use participant observation or the case study method (Merriam, 1998); if researchers want to investigate teachers' emotional experiences in a broad range of settings (e.g. different types of schools), they may interview teachers who come from different school settings (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, and Alexander, 1995). Nevertheless, it does not mean that quantitative data is irrelevant for investigation. This type of data may be useful if it is used to determine the distribution of teachers' definition or meaning of teachers' work, interpretation of working conditions and social constraints, and their feelings among the teaching population in order to assist in the exploration of the qualitative findings (Creswell, 2009).

Tsang (2012) notes that the research on Hong Kong teachers' emotional experiences at work needs to take account of the following factors: teachers' age, gender, and teaching experience. The reason is that these factors may mediate teachers' emotions (Kelchtermans, 2005). For instance, teachers of different ages, genders, and teaching experience may have different duties and positions in schools and different interpretations about their work resulting in different emotional experiences (Hargreaves, 2005; Lortie, 1975; Sikes, 1985). Tsang (2012) also suggests us to consider the effects of school demographics. In Hong Kong, teachers may teach in very different types of schools (e.g. government schools, aided schools, private schools; schools with different religious backgrounds – Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Taoism, no religion or others; schools ranging from band 1 to band 3 – band 1 schools are the best while band 3 schools are the worst). To some extent, the working conditions of each school type may be different. The differences may also influence teachers' emotional experiences. As a result, research should select informants or cases for investigation with purposive sampling technique. This sampling technique may help in maximizing variation of cases and in identifying the information-rich cases for study in depth (Patton, 1990). In this way, it will be possible to develop a better sense of the phenomenon.

To summarize, we should qualitatively study teachers' emotional experiences in Hong Kong. This kind of investigation will provide us with thick descriptions about teachers' school lives and experiences. Through these thick descriptions, we will not only obtain a relatively clear and comprehensive understanding about what

teachers' work, interpretation and emotions should be, but also develop propositions and identify the patterns of teachers' emotional experiences. Such findings will contribute to our understanding and further investigation into the phenomenon of teachers' emotional experiences in Hong Kong, and even in other countries.

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