Using Causal Layered Analysis to Understand the Alliance between Social Workers with Their Professional Association

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Abstract

The decline of professional associations due to the advent of new technologies and the expanded function of social service agencies to professionalize the social worker have impacted the level of alliance of professionals with their professional association. How aligned professionals regard themselves in relation to their professional association has implications for the challenges faced by such associations and as well as their possible futures. This article introduces how Casual Layered Analysis (CLA) can be applied to analyse and understand the level of alliance of social workers in Singapore with their professional association and the probable futures of the Association. This methodology employs an interpretative and critical approach to analyse the data to uncover layers of "truths" that are intended to help develop possible futures for the issue under study, as well as the action steps required to form that future. It allows in-depth insights into different ways of understanding underlying issues inherent in a phenomenon as well as proposing possible solutions, with adherence to methodological and scientific rigor. By taking the data through four intertwining layers of analysis, namely Litany, Systemic (Social Causes), Worldview and Myth or Metaphor, the research process promotes critical reflection and interpretation of data. Numerous underlying and concealed issues are revealed, in a way that cannot be accomplished using other mainstream research methods.

Keywords: Organizational Change, Strategic Planning, Research Methods, Social Services, Analysis

Introduction

The advent of new technologies, such as the internet, appears to have led to the decline of professional associations due to the loss of the significance of group organisation and

individuals becoming less motivated to participate in groups nowadays (Simon et al., 2007). The Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW), established in 1971, is the national professional association that represents social workers working and residing in Singapore. Despite its long history, it has been plagued by issues that have limited the Association from advancing its mission of furthering social work as a profession and encouraging a high standard of social work in Singapore (Singapore Association of Social Workers, 2013). Issues faced include insufficient support from members, declining membership figures, and lack of interest from social workers to join the Association. Due to the lack of manpower and support, SASW has been taking a long time in professionalizing its members and social workers at large. This has led some to question its relevance in the current world that is marked by rapid continuous change and uncertainty.

A critical question to ask is whether the level of alliance of social workers in Singapore with their professional association, SASW, is a strong or weak one and how this affects the extent to which they identify with their profession. Previous studies done on social work associations do not allow for a deep exploration of the underlying issues that perpetuate problems, as well as for the suggestion of possible strategies to ensure the survival of the associations (Goh, 1971; Sackville, 1990). More studies are needed to understand what drives the assumptions that people make towards their professional association that perpetuate problems affecting the association in the present and future. This requires exploring questions like: What are the myths underlying their assumptions? What are the influencers that affect perceptions and what are the historical origins of certain assumptions? As such, this study has a specific focus on social work in Singapore and more directly on SASW as the professional body for social workers.

Social worker's identification with SASW

In order to understand the social workers' level of alliance with their professional body, we would also need to understand how far the social worker identifies with their profession. Social workers who identify weakly with their profession are unlikely to have strong alliance with their professional association. More importantly, investigation needs to be done on why even social workers who identify strongly and positively with their profession do not have strong alliance with their professional association.

SASW has made some progress in fostering the social worker's identification with the Association. From its initial focus on laying the groundwork for basic practice ethics, recruiting members and reacting to emergent social needs and services, SASW has focused its efforts more on setting standards and competency in service delivery (Fan, 2003). This focus demonstrates the ambition and foresight that has driven SASW throughout the last decade when service provisions were more stabilized. Advocacy for the profession is said to be the key mission of social work professional associations (Haynes & Mickelson, cited in Queiro-Tajalli, Campbell & McNutt, 2003). Through the initiative of some members, committees have been established under the auspices of SASW to cater to practice standards, voluntary registration of social workers, and interest groups in areas such as school social work and geriatric social work. These committees and task forces look into the emerging issues of social work in these specializations (Fan, 2003).

By early 2003, SASW managed to capture about 65% membership from

the estimated 600 practicing social workers and non-practicing individuals who maintained their affiliations with SASW. The status and image of SASW were acknowledged by the media and social workers when it successfully organised the first Social Workers' Day (SWD) in January 2007 and received good media coverage and attendance.

Despite the progress made, SASW still faces problems that are hindering the extent of its influence, advancement and contribution. Given that most of its committee members and volunteers are also practicing social work professionals, SASW faces manpower issues as many of them are only able to offer ad-hoc support to the initiatives of the Association. SASW was also not able to attract qualified candidates to fill key vacant positions, such as the post of Executive Director (Fan, 2010). Many social workers adopt a passive attitude rather than commitment towards SASW.

What has driven the problems could be the constraints SASW faces. Social work associations have to work within restrictions pertaining to organisational, political and cultural spheres (Mansbach & Kaufman, 2003). SASW is constrained by the needs and demands of social service agencies and the profession (which SASW represents) that are vying for attention (Goh, 1971; Fan, 2003). As social work in Singapore is still highly agency-focused, social workers focus on their own agency commitments rather than on developing the social work profession. Most social work professionals are also well supported at their workplaces as social work agencies are obligated to provide the necessary opportunities towards professionalising their social workers (Fan, 2003). Hence, social workers in Singapore turn to various professional development initiatives available at their respective agencies rather than relying on the Association.

In spite of these constraints, social workers in Singapore appear to expect SASW to advocate for their professional training needs and to improve their welfare and work conditions (Fan, 2010). However, many of them possess negative perceptions of SASW, such as believing that it is not doing enough. These beliefs often cause them to view SASW rather critically (Fan, 2010). As such, SASW struggles from not being able to develop a strong alliance with its members despite some of them identifying strongly with the profession.

Opportunities for SASW

However, the prevailing climate for the social service sector is one that shows much potential and promise. There has been renewed interest in developing the social service sector (Choo, 2012; Leow, 2013; Lim, 2013). Support for social workers can also be seen in calls to increase the social worker's pay (Chang, 2013). SASW is now in a strategic position to contribute to the social service sector and the profession. It will be of crucial importance for SASW to reappraise its role to remain relevant to today's changeable world. It would need to find new strategies that would enable it to survive and reinvent its strategies in professionalizing social work and furthering social worker's welfare. It is important to uncover what sustains the attitudes of social workers towards SASW and discover how SASW could create a positive shift in their perceptions and assumptions.

Causal Layered Analysis: An interpretative and critical approach

Research employing CLA allows for data analysis to be conducted through

an interpretative and critical stance to uncover the deeper issues and patterns by questioning critically what are immediately evident in the data. It is also useful in "creating transformative spaces for the creation of alternative futures" (Inayatullah, 2004, p.8).

By undertaking an interpretative approach, it means that the researchers are engaged with the data comprising of texts and transcripts to observe patterns which they could then use to logically interpret social realities (Fan, 2010). There could be multiple social realities constructed by participants in the research, which are strongly influenced by their contexts (Neuman, 1994). On the other hand, critical approaches go deeper beyond the apparent reality in the data (Fan, 2010). This approach looks into the different layers of what appears to be real to the participant to uncover alternative ideas of understanding (Neuman, 1994). Critical approaches "emphasize the social and historical origins and contexts of meaning, regardless of the individual or collective forms of embodiment and expression they might take" (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 720).

CLA employs four intertwining layers of analysis, namely Litany, Systemic (Social Causes), Worldview and Myth or Metaphor. Each level of analysis affects the other. When all four levels of analysis are deconstructed and reconstructed, many different ways of knowing and possible solutions can be revealed (Bussey, 2009; Inayatullah, 2005, 2008; Ramos, 2006). The Litany Level is where the researcher seeks to identify the unquestioned views of reality. This provides the evidence or empirical data for deconstruction. At the Systemic Causes Level, the researcher will try to identify the social, technical, economic, environmental and political influences. This provides the researcher with interpretative data, where the meanings underlying human action and experience are closely examined. Within the Litany and Systemic Levels of analysis, we will most likely find the empirical and interpretive analyses of CLA. At the Worldview Level, the data is examined for deeper independent social, linguistic, and cultural structures. These meanings, the social and historical origins are contextualized and differentiated. Knowledge is then reordered at the Metaphors and Myths Levels, whereby the researcher seeks to identify deeply unconscious stories of experience and views of reality (Russo, 2004).

Through 'layering', the data can be constructed and reconstructed (Russo, 2004). The use of 'layering' played a key role in the analysis of the data to derive the deeper level understanding of the issues faced. The researcher goes through a process of questioning the origins of the perspectives through the layers of CLA in order to arrive at a macro level understanding and new insights into the issues under investigation.

This study is significant as CLA analysis was used for the first time in understanding the deeper underlying issues faced by a social work professional association in Singapore with regards to the level of alliance felt by social workers towards this association. This research is also ground-breaking in that it formally documents the development of SASW as a professional association, from 2003 to the present.

The aim of this study was to explore the level of alliance of social workers in Singapore with their professional association, SASW. The main goals were to explore the probable futures of SASW and propose strategies to fortify the present level of alliance between social workers and SASW. Participants were 27 qualified social workers (about 6% of the SASW Membership Database with 564 qualified

social workers as of Oct 2004), recruited using a non-proportional stratified and purposive sample. They came from three categories: Current registered social workers (RSWs) of SASW (11 of them), current non-registered social workers (Non-RSWs) of SASW (7 of them) and former or inactive members (Former Members) of SASW (9 of them).

The CLA framework was applied on the raw data of the study for a profound re-examination of the level of alliance between social workers and their professional association. Rather than presenting the entire findings of the research, this article will present the deconstruction and reconstruction of the issues surrounding the social worker's alliance with SASW and how these issues are affected by the assumptions, socio-political, socio-cultural, environmental, ideological, historical context and myths surrounding the issues. The research process elucidated the various underlying issues and assumptions that were perpetuating the problems faced by the Association.

Themes that arose from the replies of the respondents were further deconstructed and reconstructed into larger categories and codes using the CLA framework. This analysis can be seen in Table 1. For instance, the theme of "not seeing the value or benefits from joining" was added to the "Litany" layer of analysis and coded as "no value in joining". The theme, "having insufficient time to be involved" was interpreted and categorized under "no foreseeable benefits from joining" as it appeared to be drawn from the respondents' comments for having other priorities with more predictable benefits. The process of coding that took place in the research followed a similar pattern of categorising themes.

Table 1. *Social Workers' Overall View On The Level Of Alliance With SASW*

Litany	**no foreseeable benefits from joining** – no time, no value in joining, lack of interest in the Association's activities, social workers' inertia
Systemic causes	**Association has not achieved much; Association lacks opportunities to represent social workers** – employers providing adequately for social workers, lack of support from employers, self-sufficiency of social workers, social workers not in unison, cost being a consideration, lack of bonding of members, limitations in representation by Association, weakness in advocacy and mentorship, limitations in representation, operational weakness of the Association
Worldview	**a lack of professional identity and image; Association's lack of prominence** – this is also resounding throughout the world where the recognition and the professional status of social work, social workers and the professional body have been debated, governments intervened in the funding and development of social work services; the development of social work, social workers and the professional body become secondary to public and social policies
Myth	**key players will ensure and support the Association and not allow it to be dissolved; play down on professionalism by mass media** – that registration or even licensing will keep SASW going, expectations that SASW will deliver what social workers want, and that SASW will not be dissolved; volunteers were often depicted to be social workers by the mass media, and that these volunteers were doing social work rather than volunteer work

Horizontal gazing, or comparison across issues from the same level of analysis, was employed to reconstruct the initially constructed categories at the Litany, Systemic, Worldview and Myth Levels of analysis of the CLA framework. Thus the various interrelated issues within the main relationship pertaining to the future of SASW were compared at each similar level of analysis. For instance, the "no foreseeable benefits from joining" (alliance with SASW) category was compared with other categories in other Litany Level of analyses such as "social workers must see the need" (purpose to have SASW) versus "not all social workers need a professional association" (need for SASW). Through horizontal gazing, major differences in the respondents' interpretation of the issues at hand were illuminated (see Tables 4-7). Alternative futures were then explored using this CLA framework.

Level of alliance between social workers and SASW

In order to achieve the re-examination of the level of alliance between social workers and their professional association, three inter-related issues were deconstructed and reconstructed using the CLA framework: social workers' alliance with their professional body; their perception of the purpose of having a professional body; and their need for a professional body. These issues will be elaborated below.

Social workers' alliance with SASW

From the analysis, the overall perceptions of the respondents concerning social workers' alliance with their professional association could be seen. At the Litany Level of analysis, respondents displayed their usual beliefs about social workers' alliances with their professional association (see Table 1). These respondents felt that social workers were not keen to join the professional association because they did not see it providing them with benefits that superseded the existing welfare they could receive from their respective employers. They were also deterred from joining the Association due to the perceived costs (membership fees) and commitments (obligation to be involved in the Association's activities) associated with becoming a member.

At the Systemic Level of analysis, many of the social workers interviewed felt that the Association did not match up to their expectation of doing enough for social workers and the profession. Such perceptions were conveyed through their descriptions of the Association as being administratively weak and failing to achieve sufficient outreach to its members and social workers. Many respondents felt that they were onlookers with the role of criticising the Association and did not take personal ownership to initiate and exercise change. The Association also faced intra-organizational issues such as limited funding available and flaws in its political power.

When the data was analysed at the Worldview Level of analysis, it can be seen that the respondent's opinions reflected larger social work issues of world-wide scope or applicability. Such issues are related to the extent social workers were given due recognition and liberty to carry out their professional duties, as well as how much social work associations are accorded importance by key stakeholders and society at large.

The Myth Level of analysis reflected the unmet expectations of respondents for SASW to be well-managed and have resources for more effective outreach programmes to ensure more persuasive and successful recruitment efforts. At this Myth Level of analysis, the "bystander stance" appeared to be in operation.

The possible deep narrative of this stance could be seen in the prevailing sense of helplessness among the management of the Association due to the "it shouldn't be me" attitude of many social workers and SASW members.

Significantly, RSWs generally had a greater tendency to find and call attention to errors and flaws in the Association. They also lack time to engage with SASW due to their higher work-related stress. However, by registering themselves with the Association, it appears that they have an expectation to gain and be acknowledged by SASW despite not having the time to be involved.

Most of the Non-RSWs were long-serving and experienced practitioners in the field. Former Members were younger than RSWs and Non-RSWs. Similar to the RSWs, they were on the whole more disgruntled with SASW and had demonstrated their inertia by not quickly renewing their membership with SASW when it is due.

Social workers' perception of the purpose of having a professional body

The respondents had the opinion that SASW still had the role of improving the standard and position of social work and in attending to the social workers' professional development needs that employers may not be able to provide (see Table 2). However, social workers need to show confidence in SASW and willingly engage SASW for their professional representation and development needs.

Table 2. *Social Workers' Perception Of The Purpose Of Having A Professional Body Like SASW*

Litany	**social workers must see the need** – social workers must make effort to be involved, they want something out of the Association such as a reference letter; peer pressure to join
Systemic causes	**the Association to represent social workers** – the Association faces stiff competition from self-sufficient employers in providing for the social workers' professional development needs; fill in the gaps for employers
Worldview	**protection of public and the professionals, bonding, image and identity, advocacy and standard-setting** – training and professional development, organized professional activities, bonding of social workers, protection of the public (consumer protection), protection of the professionals, garner and maintain a collective identity
Myth	**a natural given for any profession to have a professional body to represent them** – social workers only hold 'paper-loyalty' rather than contribute to the Association

Findings from this study seem to imply that social workers tended to take SASW for granted. They expected SASW to plug the gaps rather than to vie with employers and other key training providers who were already providing specialized training programmes. They felt that the aim of SASW was to set up standards, advocacy, image building and professional protectionism. However, they did not find it necessary to actively support the affairs of SASW. As the Association comprises of a relatively small membership size (300 plus members), if that half-hearted support remains, SASW would be limited by its lack of active members from executing big plans to build up professional capability.

Social workers' need for SASW

Of all the respondents in the study, 17 of them felt that there was a need to have a professional association to help build up their social work professionalism. Many respondents claimed that they had gained from some of the programmes created by SASW. Many of these respondents had referred social workers who were just starting out for mentoring (see Table 3). Key factors that determined social workers' need for a professional association like SASW were the employers' support for staff to be involved with SASW and having the time to be involved.

Table 3. *Social Workers' Need For A Professional Body Like SASW*

Litany	**not all social workers need a professional association** – beginning social workers need a professional association to guide them more than others
Systemic causes	**differences in emphasis and competing needs in representation** – lack of synergy between SASW and its members; agency-focused orientation and outcome rather than profession-focused orientation and outcome
Worldview	**professionalizing the social worker, advocacy and standard-setting** – training and continuing professional development and education, competencies setting, collective action
Myth	**not always a homogenous body; the need to maintain and sustain the Association** – employees may not be homogeneous with similar professional background; big emphasis on employers' effort to promote professionalism; there is an unspoken expectation to "hold on" and not "let go" of the Association

In the respondents' reply to why social workers needed a professional association like SASW (Litany Level of analysis), they cited that compared to experienced staff, new social workers required more support. This answer was in contrast to their given responses to the purpose of having a professional association. Nevertheless, it would be presumptuous to believe that most inexperienced social workers would need on-the-job training to develop the needed skills to perform reasonably well in their job. This is because such new social workers may not be able to afford the time to acquire other foundational professional developmental growth areas. SASW has a purpose in conducting training in areas where employers do not have the training structure for new social workers. However, nowadays, through training grants, agencies have more funds and manpower to tailor-make professional development programmes. For instance, they might be able to use funds to employ senior social workers to conduct supervision programmes.

In contrast, it was difficult for SASW to sustain regular training and supervision programmes. At the Systemic Level of analysis, there appeared to be little synergism among SASW and its members as it did not have the resources to hire a group of local or overseas regular trainers. Instead, SASW had to rely on its pool of senior social workers who carried various skill-sets and were from different sectors of social work to carry out its professional development programmes on an ad hoc project management basis. SASW was then subjected to the schedules of these social workers, as well as their employers' kindness to release them to help SASW run training programmes. At their agencies, social workers had to produce evidence-based work outcomes, which made it unmanageable for them to divert their energies to areas beyond their own agency priorities. It appeared that SASW needed to adopt

a 'win-win' strategy where both parties, SASW and the partnering agency, were able to derive common benefits when they worked together.

At the Worldview Level, the idea that the role of professional associations was to help to create practice standards, professionalize social work and advocate for the profession remains. Nevertheless, we need to be aware that at the Myth Level of analysis, we refer to professionalization of employees nowadays as if we are referring to a common group of professionals. This is a fallacy as agencies are not uniform in focusing on a particular profession. Some agencies would need to balance between the different groups of professionals they have engaged to ensure fairness in attending to their welfare and needs. Therefore, catering to needs, setting common standards and creating professional opportunities for social workers become more challenging in contexts where staffs have to work in multi-disciplinary teams. Such teams are comprised of professionals from non-social work disciplines. Furthermore, increasingly, professional associations now need to collaborate with the various boards of accreditation, registration and licensing. We are seeing more of such boards growing in their influence. Another myth concerns the need to retain the Association due to its 'long-standing history' (close to 40 years of existence at the time of the study). Here, there is the deep narrative of "holding on" and not "letting go". The impact of this myth is how a sense of helplessness prevails, especially those among SASW's management who may find it difficult to let go. It may also create anxiety in people who expected the Association to continue running.

Reconstructing social workers' alliance with SASW & possible solutions

Through horizontal gazing in the CLA reconstruction, it appeared that the respondents shared similar world views related to alliance and the purpose and need for a professional association that were alike. However, when it came to the other three levels of analysis, whilst the worldviews held by respondents remained similar and unchanged in the Litany, Systemic and Myth Levels, there were great differences in their comprehension of these issues (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Litany Level Of Analysis Of Social Workers' Alliance With SASW*

Alliance with SASW	**no foreseeable benefits from joining** – no time, no value in joining, lack of interest in the Association's activities, social workers' inertia
Purpose to have SASW	**social workers must see the need** – social workers must make effort to be involved, they want something out of the Association such as a reference letter; peer pressure to join
Need for SASW	**not all social workers need a professional association** – beginning social workers need a professional association to guide them more than others

From what they had mentioned, the research participants seem to operate out of the presumption that not every social worker would require a professional association. This assumption was supported by their report about lacking time and interest for the Association. At the Litany Level on social workers' alliance with SASW, the deep narrative suggested that SASW was experiencing stagnation and did not have much to offer. Hence, to increase its attendance rate, SASW's outreach efforts to social workers must be well-timed and goal-oriented. The Association

should spend more effort on maintaining the experienced social workers' concern with their professionalism and introduce advanced professional practice and credentialing.

Many respondents failed to see that SASW faced great difficulties in setting itself out to be the professional body for social workers. Some of these difficulties included fierce competition from voluntary welfare agencies and some agencies facing a lack of a common professional identity (See Table 5). One deep narrative would be that SASW was powerless and lack the authority to effect change. The data suggested that SASW's representation of social workers could be seen as "redundant".

Table 5. *Systemic Level Of Analysis Of Social Workers' Alliance With SASW*

Alliance with SASW	**Association has not achieved much; Association lacks opportunities to represent social workers** – employers' providing adequately for social workers, lack of support from employers, self-sufficiency of social workers, social workers not in unison, cost being a consideration, lack of bonding of members, limitations in representation by Association, weakness in advocacy and mentorship, limitations in representation, operational weakness of the Association
Purpose to have SASW	**the Association to represent social workers** – the Association faces stiff competition from self-sufficient employers in providing for the professional development needs of social workers; fill in the gaps for employers
Need for SASW	**differences in emphasis and competing needs in representation** – lack of synergy between SASW and its members; agency-focused orientation and outcome rather than profession-focused orientation and outcome

What would help address this issue is to work on fostering better communication between SASW's members and the social workers at large. It is crucial for SASW to be acknowledged as a key partner by the government and organisations and agencies related to social work in attending to the professional development of social workers.

Respondents appraised SASW against its main purpose, such as its role in advocacy and in setting standards of practice (see Table 6). They felt that SASW should safeguard the status and image of social work and social workers. This suggests that the Association could play a "guardianship role". Such views contrasted with the "redundancy" metaphor. This disagreement between systemic and worldview narratives made it apparent that SASW must not lose its core mission. To ensure consistent quality in social work practice across all sectors, SASW needs to step up efforts to fortify the weaker areas of social work.

Table 6. *Worldview Level Of Analysis Of Social Workers' Alliance With SASW*

Alliance with SASW	**a lack of professional identity and image; Association's lack of prominence** – this is also resounding throughout the world; the development of social work, social workers and the professional body become secondary to public and social policies

Purpose to have SASW	**protection of public and the professionals, bonding, image and identity, advocacy and standard-setting** – training and professional development, organized professional activities, bonding of social workers, protection of the public (consumer protection), protection of the professionals, garner and maintain a collective identity
Need for SASW	**professionalizing the social worker, advocacy and standard-setting** – training and continuing professional development and education, competencies setting, collective action

As seen in Table 7, many respondents put too much stress on registration as the main point in cementing the image and status of social work (see Table 6). However, even when Hong Kong started practicing mandatory licensing of social workers, it failed to create positive impact on membership rates for the Hong Kong Association of Social Workers (Personal communication with Hong Kong Association of Social Workers, 9 Oct 2008). This is made more apparent when membership and registration are not linked to one another and do not need to rely on each other to carry out their functions, as in the case of SASW.

Table 7. *Myth Level Of Analysis Of Social Workers' Alliance With SASW*

Alliance with SASW	**key players will ensure and support the Association and not allow it to be dissolved; play down on professionalism by mass media** – that registration or even licensing will keep SASW going, expectations that SASW will deliver what social workers want, and SASW will not be dissolved; volunteers were often depicted as social workers by the mass media, and that these volunteers were doing social work rather than volunteer work
Purpose to have SASW	**a natural given for any profession to have a professional body to represent them; registration of social workers** – social workers only holding 'paper-loyalty' rather than contributing to the Association; registration of social workers will enhance social workers' alliance with SASW
Need for SASW	**not always homogenous** – employees may not be homogeneous with similar professional background; big emphasis on employers' effort to promote professionalism

Almost all of the respondents (26 out of 27) felt that the most significant stakeholders of any professional association would be the professionals themselves. However, respondents appeared to be complacent in their efforts to be active contributors to improve SASW's stability and status, although they acknowledged the value in doing so. They believed that SASW had a main group of supports that would be enough to sustain the Association. What prevented them from being active in the Association was the myth in their belief that SASW would be able to see itself through. As SASW has limited support, it needs to be more visionary to initiate smaller scale projects regularly that SASW, the social workers and their employers are interested in, albeit at a slower pace.

From the analysis of social workers' alliance with their professional association, social workers acknowledged the need to have a professional body to represent them. However, this need was not a strong one as social workers did not possess full

ownership of the Association. Rather than taking charge and being involved in the Association, members of the Association preferred to be bystanders.

Underlying ideologies behind key issues faced by the Association

In summary, respondents appeared to regard their alliances with SASW as less than satisfactory to weak. They did not have sufficient knowledge of SASW to give their opinions on its organizational structure, its challenges and probable future. However, they identified strongly with the social work profession. Their ongoing interest in SASW could be sustained by their wish to advance this profession. While they lacked time to be actively involved with the Association, they still regarded SASW as an instrument of change in promoting the social work's status or the wellbeing of social workers. Their 'busyness' indicate that SASW was not in their priority. Table 10 outlines the key issues faced by SASW and the underlying ideologies behind them:

Table 8. *A Critical Analysis Of Key Issues Faced By SASW & Their Underlying Ideologies*

Perspective	Problem Defined	Underlying Ideology (myth / image / story)
Litany	**Blind spots in expectations between social workers & SASW** - in needs and service provisions	SASW is treated as a back-up resource by social workers and employers
Systemic	Competition rather than collaboration - SASW has to compete to represent social workers; its resources are external to SASW	Dependent on goodwill & reciprocal benefits; accreditation driven, not membership driven
Worldview	**SASW is not fully autonomous** - strong governmental influence; play down by public figures & the mass media	A semi-controlled social institution highly influenced by socio-economic & political climate of the day; government's focus is on social service sector & not social workers per se
Myth	**SASW will not be dissolved** - there are key players; it will always have a role to play	It has a long history and it has survived; there is a strong belief that someone else will come to its rescue

Table 8 reflects the different issues faced by SASW and the recurrent underlying ideologies maintained by stakeholders such as social workers, employers and the government. SASW's weakness laid in opinions held by social workers that lessened its importance. For each layer of analysis in the CLA framework, there were continuing myths found in the ideologies discovered at those layers. These myths sustained all understanding about SASW and limited the conceptions about its future. Hence, there needs to be a shift in the attitudes of social workers and other stakeholders in order for SASW to remain relevant and effective.

Discussion

This study demonstrated the utility of adopting the CLA methodology in research on understanding the level of alliance of social workers with their professional association. The use of the semi-structured CLA interview guide as its questioning method, as well as taking the responses through the different

layers of CLA is an effective way of facilitating in depth exploration with research participants, as well as deeper reflective interpretative and critical analysis of the data. This has implication on research as well as addressing the issues faced by the professional association.

CLA questioning as the vehicle for drawing out insightful personal opinions

CLA enables a process of inquiry through following a series of questions targeted at uncovering the deeper issues and patterns beyond what is obvious through arriving at deep and broad answers to the issues (Russo, 2004). The issues are considered at all four levels of the CLA (Litany, Systemic, Worldview and Myth) and alternative perspectives are considered. Through the CLA questioning, the respondents are invited to reflect deeper and more critically into their assumptions. For example, there were differential expectations between social workers and SASW in terms of social workers' needs and service provisions by SASW. Fuelling this divide is the alternative perspective that SASW was being treated as a back-up or second class organization. These opinions of the participants were derived after a series of questions in exploring what social workers expect of SASW (horizontal gazing exploring the breath of the issue), how these needs are articulated and why these needs are important to them, how these needs can be met by SASW or some other agencies, why they think SASW can or cannot meet those needs and so on. The latter questions concern vertical gazing exploring the depth of one of the selected issues on social workers' expectations through all the layers of the CLA framework. To further illustrate this point, the need to professionalize oneself bears heavily on the myth of a professional association's responsibility and societal expectations of a professional more than a social worker's own initiative wanting to professionalize. The social workers' initiative to professionalize is taken for granted to be true (Litany Level of analysis). Social workers were less complaining and more forgiving of employers who failed to professionalize them (myth of professional responsibility to be centred on only one supposedly main resource, SASW).

CLA as the vehicle to generate deep understanding

Through CLA, complicated, multi-dimensional issues can be deconstructed and reconstructed so that different levels of truth can be uncovered. As many different views linked to an issue are questioned, it increases the likelihood of obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the problem (Russo, 2004). By taking into account heterogeneous perspectives, and through moving up and down the different levels of CLA, insights can be generated and strategic solutions can be suggested that goes beyond just solutions that tackle the surface issues sustaining the problems. By applying a critical approach towards interpretation of the data, the researcher was able to generate a deeper comprehension of the problem through making inference from the respondents' replies. For instance, this critical analysis can be seen in the recommendation to adopt a collaborative-competitive stance in enhancing SASW's market share with like-minded training partners instead of direct competition with every training institution. The survival stance for SASW is to go regional to maximize and share resources with other social work associations that have limited membership size and financial resources. The future of a social work association hub is the way to grow professional associations. To arrive at this point, the researcher had to infer that social workers tend to accord higher loyalty towards their

employers despite that they are grateful towards SASW's effort to professionalize the profession and to excel as a professional body. As a result, social workers do not want SASW to compete with their employers but would prefer SASW to collaborate with them. Taking this insight further in a deeper analysis, it appears that social workers tend to be harsher on their professional body than their employers.

CLA as promoting understanding of the issue in its wider socio-political context and socio-historical background

At the level of systemic causes, the issue is questioned to find out the social and historical influences that may construct the problem. This method helps us to understand the issue in its wider socio-historical-cultural context. The larger socio-political and socio-historical background is uncovered as the participants reflect on the crux of the issues. The researcher is able to trace the origins of various worldviews to assumptions that underlie them through applying a critical and interpretative lens through analysis of the data. This process of situating the issue in its wider socio-historical-cultural context is illustrated by the analysis that social work remained as a lesser esteemed profession as propelled by negative publicity by the media and politicians alike. SASW is not fully autonomous as what its members want it to be in view of its long-standing financial dependency on both government and charitable foundations' support. Due to this historical background, few social workers believe that SASW will become obsolete.

Strengthening the rigor of research

Through the ongoing interactive process of analysing the data at the different layers of CLA, the credibility of the findings are enhanced as the data is checked, confirmed and tested for accuracy through the various levels of analysis and "layering".

Furthermore, the CLA questioning employed by the interviewer through the use of the interview guide helped the participants to reflect deeper into and articulate their constructions of their reality and assumptions. As all levels of the CLA are accepted as reality, the questions asked are those inviting further thoughts on the issue and not promoting any judgement or criticism from the researcher. The neutral stance adopted by the researcher in listening to the respondents' perspectives promotes trust from the respondents to freely share their perspectives without fearing any negative or subjective intrusion from the researcher.

Research as an empowering process

CLA encourages dynamic co-learning between the researcher and respondent as through the questions developed at the different CLA layers, the respondents are encouraged to reflect through their perspectives and experiences (Russo, 2004). The personal perspectives of the respondents are prized and regarded as "truth". This allows the research participants to feel as though they have a stake in finding solutions to the issue at hand, as their role in giving the researcher insights to the problems faced by the Association is acknowledged. CLA looks at all levels of analysis at the CLA layers and accepts all these levels as reality.

Limitations

It is worth mentioning that there are some limitations of using the CLA methodology. Firstly, as the research is largely based on interviews and the subjective perceptions of each respondent, there could be the possibility of biases of social desirability in the responses given by the research participants. Secondly, it is possible that the analysis could be influenced by the subjective preconceived notions of the researcher, which might be not immediately apparent when the analysis was being conducted. Especially for one of the researchers with a prior history and connection with the Association as its past president and ex-official, there may be some influence from the subjective judgement of the researcher. However, given the dearth of pertinent published material (SASW has a loose collection of policy documents, reports and minutes of meetings), this researcher (Fan, 2010) was able to bring into the research privileged knowledge on social and public policies and insider knowledge of the Association. The researcher's familiarity with the social work profession, SASW and social workers in Singapore provided invaluable experience in helping to manoeuvre through the interpretive and critical analyses of the data. The researcher could tap on this insider knowledge to integrate many social realities of SASW, stakeholders of the Association and social workers in the study. Finally, generalisation of the study to other contexts should be viewed with caution as the sample size in the study was limited to the membership database managed by the Association. Findings of the study were limited to the current socio-economic and political factors impacting on SASW and the status of the social work movement in Singapore at the time of the study, which is from 2005 to 2010.

Reflexivity

Some of the limitations mentioned above might be overcome with reflexivity employed by the researcher. While it is possible there may be some influence from the prior connections that the researcher may have with the Association, in the process of unfolding inquiry, the researcher was able to adopt a neutral stance in engaging the respondents through the CLA questioning to prevent the researcher from influencing the participants' responses. The field notes kept by the researcher helped promote reflexivity, which minimised any potential for bias.

Conclusion

CLA methodology promotes deeper analysis and understanding of the level of alliance of social workers with their professional association. The CLA questioning method allows for the subjective viewpoints of respondents on this level of alliance to be elucidated. It can be seen in the main features of the selected findings presented in this article that respondents' perceptions of the level of alliances were very much shaped by larger personal, national and even global, structural and systemic issues as well as underlying organizational challenges faced by the professional association. Thus employing CLA methodology in this research promoted an in-depth, critical and interpretative approach towards understanding the crux of issues perpetuating the problems faced by the Association.

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