British Journal of Social Work (2025) **55**, 2937–2956
https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf081
Advance Access Publication May 25, 2025

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Exploring reflective practices amongst Chinese social workers: A qualitative analysis using social work case logs and in-depth interviews

Tianzhen Zhang, Ning Wang *, and Meiping Fei

School of Social and Public Administration, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai 200237, China

*Corresponding author. School of Social and Public Administration, East China University of Science and Technology, No.130, Meilong Road, Xuhui District, Shanghai 200237, China. E-mail: ningwang0417@outlook.com; ningwang0417@ecust.edu.cn

Abstract

Reflection is integral to the professional practice of social workers. Research on professional reflection amongst Chinese social workers has been relatively scarce since social work emerged as a profession in China in the 1980s. This study analysed 492 online social work case logs and conducted eight in-depth interviews with experienced social workers to investigate how Chinese social workers reflect within their professional practice. Content analysis of case logs revealed that social workers' reflections typically focus on four dimensions: service recipients, professional roles, ethical principles, and service techniques. However, these reflections primarily describe the service process and often lack critical analysis and creativity. In-depth interviews with social workers provide corroboration and explanations of the above findings, revealing how individual training, organizational environments, and epistemological stance influence social workers' approaches to reflective practice. This article offers insights into the reflective practices of Chinese social workers and informs future professional training and supervision efforts.

© *The Author(s) 2025. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers. All rights reserved. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site—for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com.*

BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers
www.basw.co.uk

Keywords: professional reflection; Chinese social workers; online case logs; in-depth interviews.

Accepted: April 2025

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Introduction

Reflective practice is essential for effective and person-centred professional practices (Bulman 2008). In social work, reflection is a critical bridge between practice and knowledge production. Posner and Rudnitsky (1994) argue that reflection is necessary for attaining a deep understanding of practice. By critically examining professional services, practice-related issues identified in the process can be transformed into practice-focused research questions. Additionally, previously ignored aspects hidden within service scenarios, such as culture, gender, race, and self, can be revealed during reflection. The process of uncovering can help generate knowledge relevant to practice and research (Fook 1996, 2002).

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on incorporating practitioners as integral members of social work knowledge construction, with many arguing that researchers should pay more attention to practitioners' experiences, perspectives, and reflections to conduct pragmatically oriented knowledge production (Sim et al. 2019). In the context of the growing acknowledgement of practitioners' voices, it becomes particularly crucial to understand what social workers reflect on and how they engage in the reflection process.

However, a review of the literature indicates that research on social work practitioners' reflection focuses predominantly on self-development and reflective practices within specific areas of practice (Lam, Wong, and Leung 2007; Burr et al. 2016). While some studies have explored topics such as reflection on mistakes in practice amongst Chinese social workers and the relationship between education and reflective practice (Lam, Wong, and Leung 2007; Ping 2012; Lu and Chen 2022), there remains a notable lack of in-depth analysis regarding the content of these reflections, the underlying factors driving them, and their implications for knowledge production. This study aims to address this gap by examining two key research questions: what do Chinese social workers reflect on during their professional practices, and what factors influence their reflective practices?

Reflection, social work reflection, and the context of China

The modern sense of Reflection was introduced by Dewey (1910: 6), who defines it as a purposeful and continuous process of thought through which practitioners identify and address problems in practice. This process is often summarized by the principle of 'learning by doing' (Dewey 1910).

Reflection encompasses two fundamental qualities: criticality and reflexivity. Criticality involves situating social contexts within specific cultural frameworks and critically examining the effects of unequal power dynamics on individuals (Fook 2003; Thompson and Pascal 2012). Reflexivity, on the other hand, refers to a self-referential process of introspection that occurs within the context of practical work. It entails connecting life situations to one's social position, thereby fostering new experiences and heightened self-awareness (Woolgar 1988).

The practice of reflection is commonly referred to as reflective practice, which is characterized by two core perspectives: 'reflection-on-action' and 'reflection-in-action'. Reflection-on-action involves critically analysing past actions, summarizing experiences, and reflecting on events that have occurred. In contrast, reflection-in-action focuses on critically evaluating ongoing practices and associated situations during the action process, with the aim of identifying new strategies for future action (Schön 1983). Based on the content of reflection, scholars have categorized reflective practice into various types, including technical, practical, critical, and process reflections (Ruch 2005; Lu, Fu, and Xu 2023). While all these types of reflection are evident in social work practice, process reflection has received comparatively limited attention within the field.

Reflective practice in social work is rooted in practical experience. Social workers engage in reflective processes by critically reviewing their work situations to identify challenges and acquire new skills, thereby enhancing learning through practice (Sicora 2010). This process is intrinsically linked to self-awareness, emotions, and personal interests, often placing significant emphasis on personal experiences and transformations (Occhiuto et al. 2024).

However, one limitation is that social workers often confine their reflections to surface-level problem-solving, neglecting to address deeper assumptions or biases that are critical for achieving transformational change (Ferguson 2018; Taiwo 2022). Fook (2003) emphasizes that reflection should transcend personal experiences to critically interrogate societal structures, power relations, and systemic injustices that influence practice. Although social workers frequently reflect on their individual experiences, they may fail to engage in critical reflection that interrogates the broader social and political contexts in which their practice is embedded (Thompson and Pascal 2012).

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Moreover, social work reflection often lacks a systematic approach to reflexivity. Although personal experiences are commonly examined, insufficient attention is given to the reflexive process of analysing how the practitioner's identity, biases, and lived experiences shape their interactions with clients (Lay and McGuire 2010).

In China, the educational system and socio-cultural context significantly shape how social workers comprehend and engage in reflective practice. The dominance of an exam-oriented education system has hindered the cultivation of critical thinking skills amongst students (Ke and Liang 2023). Furthermore, the Confucian philosophy of '*Zhongyong*' (the Doctrine of the Mean), which promotes conformity, harmony, and compromise, has, to some extent, limited the development of more radical forms of critical thinking (Du and Yao 2015).

Social work education in China is currently delivered through higher education, vocational training, and professional supervision (Law and Gu 2008). In terms of curriculum design, higher education in social work places substantial emphasis on theoretical knowledge (Baikady, Varoshini, and Jianguo 2024). Core courses primarily focus on the transmission of existing knowledge, offering limited opportunities for students to critically analyse or challenge established theories (Baikady and Cheng 2022). Although internships and practical experiences are increasingly emphasized, reflective practice remains inadequately addressed in training programmes. Students and social workers frequently prioritize task completion during practice, with limited opportunities for systematic self-reflection or the development of critical thinking skills (Mo, Leung, and Tsui 2019; Lu, Fu, and Xu 2023).

Levels of reflection: an analytical framework

The lifeworld encompasses diverse practical activities, forming a pre-reflective experiential realm. Habermas and Shapiro (1971) delineate three levels of cognitive interests emanating from the lifeworld: technical, practical, and emancipatory. Expanding on this framework, Van Manen (1995) elaborates on three types of reflection: technical, practical, and critical. Taylor (2010) adopted a framework similar to Van Manen's, further refining the classifications and offering detailed explanations along with practical guidance for each type of reflection (see Table 1).

Taylor's (2010) examination of reflective practice addresses inquiries regarding its development and the necessary conditions for its attainment. In explaining the steps of reflective practice, Taylor identifies several common components: (1) recalling and detailing the event; (2) critically analysing the event by investigating the essence of the problem or scrutinizing one's actions and motivations; and (3) synthesizing the experiences from the event and suggesting novel approaches. These

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Table 1. Levels and steps of reflection.

Levels of reflection	Explanations	Steps in professional practice
Technical reflection	This is grounded in scientific methods and deductive thinking. Practitioners utilize formal theories and technical knowledge as evidence to scrutinize, modify, and refine existing work techniques, ultimately proposing new knowledge to enhance current practices. (Ruch 2005; Taylor 2010)	1. Problem assessment. 2. Problem analysis and hypothesis formation. 3. Intervention process evaluation and retrospective summary
Practical reflection	As elaborated by Schön (1983), this involves the bottom-up acquisition of knowledge from practice, thereby enriching the established knowledge framework.	1. Restating one's own experience 2. Explaining the significance of the situation 3. Proposing new insights and integrating them into one's own knowledge framework
Critical reflection	This interrogates prevailing societal norms, political ideologies, and cultural constructs (Ruch 2005). It conceptualizes issues within macro social structures, aiming to liberate individuals from ingrained assumptions and oppressions, consequently fostering breakthroughs in practice (Taylor 2010).	1. Recalling the sequence of events 2. Analysing the potential power dynamics and interactive relationships within the events 3. Re-evaluating practice through a critical lens 4. Reconstructing thoughts and exploring transformative possibilities

Source: adapted from Taylor (2010).

three elements reveal the developmental trajectory of reflection conducive to knowledge production, as it transitions from superficial to profound insights. We adopt Taylor's framework as our analytical lens due to its systematic categorization of reflective practice types and its provision of practical reference tools, which assist in discussing our findings. At the same time, we extend our discussion to encompass other forms of reflective practice in the discussion section, thereby situating our findings within a more comprehensive conceptual landscape.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology with a two-phase research design. In the first phase, we conducted a content analysis of secondary data, particularly case logs written by Chinese social workers on an online social work educational platform. The second phase involved in-depth interviews with eight Chinese social workers, aiming to achieve a comprehensive understanding of social work reflection.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Phase One

The primary aim of Phase One was to explore the reflections of Chinese social workers during their professional practices. Building on Furman's (2004) assertion that writing serves as an effective means of self-discovery, we examined social workers' reflections captured in their case writing following professional interventions. The data for this phase were drawn from *Smartsowo*, one of China's largest online educational platforms for social work. Designed to enhance social work education and practice, *Smartsowo* collaborates with social work institutions and universities across China, providing a space for practitioners, educators, and students to exchange knowledge and share experience. Since 2020, the platform has introduced a feature that allows social workers to voluntarily upload anonymized case logs based on their professional practices. These case logs are organized into six structured sections: background, problem definition, service objectives, intervention process, evaluation, and professional reflection. For this study, we focused on those published between 2020 and 2022 and initially identified 565 case logs. Only case logs containing a 'professional reflection' section were included, resulting in a final dataset of 492. It is worth noting that this approach may have excluded relevant reflective content embedded in other sections. The length of these case logs ranged from 829 to 17,053 Chinese characters, with an average length of 4,524 characters.

Inductive coding was used to analyse the data. To enhance the credibility of the coding process, each team member independently conducted open coding between March and May 2023, with regular meetings held to discuss the coding procedures and align interpretations. During the coding process, the team members referred to Taylor's (2010) framework on the classifications and processes of reflection, comparing it with our data to collaboratively develop a shared understanding of how to differentiate between various types and levels of reflection. For example, if practitioners in the data only recorded the roles they took on during the service without reflecting on the functions of these roles or the power dynamics involved, it was then coded as 'Description of service roles' rather than a deeper-level reflection. In cases of disagreement, initial differences were addressed through discussion, with each coder presenting their interpretation. If consensus could not be reached, team members engaged in further discussion and sought consultation from scholars with similar research experience, ultimately ensuring a consensus was reached.

Phase Two

Phase Two aimed to achieve two objectives: first, to provide triangulation of evidence from Phase One, and secondly, to offer an in-depth

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Table 2. Participant characteristics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Social work practice experience (years)	Occupation
Jun	Male	13	Social work supervisors
Lee	Female	8	Social worker
Soeng	Female	15	Social worker
Yao	Female	13	Social work supervisors
Peng	Male	20	Social work supervisors
Dada	Female	9	Social worker
Lou	Female	12	Social worker
Tan	Male	18	Social worker

explanation of the findings of Phase One. We employed purposive sampling and the snowball method to approach social workers with extensive practical experience, as they are likely to have a more comprehensive understanding of current social work practices. Participants were presented with the findings from Phase One and were informed that they were free to provide feedback, whether in agreement or disagreement with the results. In addition, we asked participants about their own reflective practices in social work and the factors that influence these processes. Eight senior social workers, each with between eight and twenty years of practical experience, participated in in-depth interviews between September and October 2023. During the data collection process, we observed that the seventh and eighth interviews did not yield any new categories related to the topics discussed, indicating that data saturation had been achieved. Each interview lasted over 60 min. All interviews were audio-recorded after obtaining consent from the interviewees. Table 2 presents the characteristics of the participants.

Thematic analysis was used for data analysis in Phase Two. The first author transcribed the eight interviews in Chinese and distributed the transcripts to all team members to read. The first author then developed an initial codebook through inductive coding, while the second and third authors reviewed the codebook and provided feedback. Disagreements among coders were addressed by inviting a third-party scholar with relevant research experience to engage in joint discussions to check the themes and provide feedback. A final theme structure was confirmed after several rounds of discussions and revisions.

Research ethics

This research received ethical approval from East China University of Science and Technology. All public social work case logs on *Smartsowo* have been anonymized and approved for use in social work research. The names used in this article have been further anonymized.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the consent of the interviewees and their agencies, and consent forms were signed by all participants prior to the research.

Findings

Types of reflection in case logs

Using content analysis to code the case logs, we identified four primary categories of content in the reflection section of social workers' case logs. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of cases across each type of reflection.

Four types of reflection emerged from the content analysis: service recipients, the role of social workers, ethical principles, and service techniques. Reflection on the latter was the most common, indicating that a significant proportion of social workers focus extensively on detailing the theories and techniques used in the service process. In comparison, reflections on service recipients and ethical principles appeared less frequently in the data.

Reflection on service recipients

Reflection on service recipients encompasses descriptions of clients' individual situations, the analysis of problems utilizing theoretical frameworks, the summarization of common needs amongst service populations, and the examination of social structural factors underlying individual challenges. However, our analysis indicates a deficiency in critical reflection and exploration of the root causes of these issues within social workers' reflections. Social workers tend to provide direct descriptions of clients' situations or the problems they face, rather than critically analysing how these factors affect the clients' lives or the interactions between them. The following excerpt from a case log shows this type of direct description:

> The boy was experiencing emotional instability due to various factors. These included his parents' divorce and his father's disability. Additionally, he had to contend with growth pressure, academic pressure, family pressure, and peer pressure. Without proper guidance, he is particularly vulnerable to enduring mental and emotional turmoil.

Reflecting on client-related work is essential for improving social work practice, especially in informing and creating a foundation for the next steps in the helping process (Ryding and Wernersson 2019). Critical reflection further aids social workers in recognizing the diversity and oppression of clients, as suggested by Maidment and Cooper (2022).

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Table 3. Types of reflection in selected case logs.

Reflection types		Number (percentage) of case logs
Reflection Types	Sub-types	
Service recipients	Description of service recipients' situation	89 (18.9)
	Theoretical analysis of service recipients' problems	54 (11.0)
	Population-level reflection	17 (3.5)
	Assessment of the social environments surrounding the recipients	7 (1.4)
Role of social worker	Description of service roles	164 (33.3)
	New considerations of role functions	55 (11.2)
	Critical reflection on roles	12 (2.4)
	Reflections of the roles in inter-professional collaboration	2 (0.4)
Ethical principles	Description of compliance with ethical principles	79 (16.1)
	Reflection on the effectiveness of ethical principles	18 (3.7)
	Reflexive thinking on ethical principles	4 (0.8)
	Reinterpretation of ethical principles	4 (0.8)
Service techniques	Description of practices	221 (44.9)
	Application of theory or techniques	145 (29.5)
	Critical reflection on theory and techniques	24 (4.9)

Lacking critical reflection may result in the oversight of underlying power dynamics and oppression (Mattsson 2014).

Reflection on role of social worker

Reflection on the role of social workers emphasizes practitioners' perceptions of their positions and functions in professional service. These reflections are mostly descriptive, with practitioners often viewing themselves as supporters, therapists, or advocates. According to Taylor (2010), better reflection should incorporate criticality, requiring social workers to examine the implicit power dynamics and assumed behaviours inherent within their professional roles, as well as considering the impacts of these roles on practice.

While many social workers may not fully meet Taylor's expectations in this regard, there were several exceptions. Social workers sometimes adopted a broader perspective in their reflections, considering the roles and functions that social workers can play in interdisciplinary collaboration teams:

> Social workers and volunteers are both indispensable parts of the service team. Social workers alone cannot ensure the continuity of services, but they can fully utilize their professional advantages in resource linking and coordination. By leveraging the respective professional strengths of volunteer teams composed of medical students and community members, they can enhance and promote the social care system.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

In such situations, they consequently initiate reflections on the position of social work within the social governance system or explore opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Reflection on ethical principles

Reflections on ethical principles encompass four levels, including illustrating how practitioners adhere to ethical principles in service, contemplating the effectiveness of ethical principles, engaging in reflexive thinking on ethical principles, and gaining new insights or thoughts on ethical issues through personal practice. However, these reflections are typically still descriptive. For example, 'I always adhere to informed consent and client autonomy, respecting client self-determination'. However, some social workers demonstrated a deeper level of reflection when confronted with ethical conflicts. They critically assessed their decisions, contributing new insights into the boundaries and essence of ethical principles. For example, in a family case, the social worker discovered that the husband in the family was making numerous unreasonable demands on his wife, which prompted a reflection on the ethical principle of non-judgmentalism:

> The non-judgemental attitude described in textbooks refers to social workers not showing resistance or rejection when others have opinions that differ from their own. However, it extends beyond simply tolerating different opinions. Rather, non-judgementalism entails a genuine understanding of others' motivations, thereby enhancing their grasp of ethical principles in practice.

These reflective practices highlight social workers' critical thinking skills, which enable them to broaden their understanding of the evolving contexts wherein ethical principles are applied.

Reflection on service techniques

Reflection on service techniques involves describing specific steps and practices in the service process, interpreting how theory is applied, and engaging in critical theoretical thinking. We found that the majority of reflections tended to be procedural in nature, such as 'I utilised a strengths-based perspective in the service, encouraging team members to discover each other's strengths'. Most social workers' reflections on theory and techniques remained focussed on application, often lacking critical and creative dimensions. Critical reflections are infrequent and typically arise only when encountering new situations in practice that existing theory does not adequately address or when inconsistencies between theory and practice emerge. For example, one social worker reflects,

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

> Although the narrative therapy framework emphasises structure, each patient's story and underlying logic are unique. Overemphasis on structure can lead to overlooking individual differences amongst clients. Therefore, it is necessary to respect individual variations in illness, life circumstances, and resources, empower patients, and create new narratives.

Additionally, we discovered fragmented descriptions of reflections on two specific characteristics of Chinese Indigenous social work practice, *guanxi* and *renqing*, in the case logs. *Guanxi* can be characterized as an ego-centred social engineering of relationship building. The efforts people put into establishing *guanxi* are seen as a form of 'social investment', with the expectation of receiving returns (Barbalet 2021). *Renqing* refers to the emotions that align with interpersonal relationships and the behaviours and agreements that help to maintain these relationships (Fei, Hamilton, and Zheng 1992). Social workers promote the implementation of professional services by skilfully utilizing methods such as *guanxi* and *renqing*, which embody local cultural characteristics. As such, we have also categorized these as reflections on service techniques. For example, 'Firstly, we need to help the service recipient establish good connections with the village and the villagers. In this society, integrating resources is very important. Therefore, we visited all village committee members and became familiar with them, through which we have applied more resources for the client'. Another example follows: 'When we follow *renqing* to handle issues for service users, it may be easier to get things done, but this can conflict with professional boundaries. Conversely, when we adhere strictly to professional boundaries, the clients may accuse us of being detached from reality'. These reflections incorporate characteristics of Chinese culture, demonstrating valuable Indigenous practice wisdom. However, since they do not introduce new viewpoints or demonstrate critical thinking, these reflections lack sufficient depth.

In summary, the findings indicate that Chinese social workers primarily focus their reflections on describing the service process, including the situations of clients and the role of social workers. Most of these reflections fall into the technical and practical levels of Taylor's (2010) reflection framework and thus lack a critical lens for understanding power dynamics, structural constraints, and the fundamental factors of events. This inclination towards description may result in a lack of depth in reflection. According to Taylor (2010), 'description' represents the initial stage of reflection, and profound reflection should include criticism and creation built upon this foundation'. By Taylor's standards, the current stage of reflection amongst Chinese social workers is 'insufficient'.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Reasons for insufficient reflection: perspectives from senior social workers

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed three key themes explaining this insufficient reflection.

An organizational environment prioritizing technical rationality

The organizational environment can significantly influence social workers' reflective practices. First, professional training within organizations often emphasizes technical rationality. This approach prioritizes the technical aspects of social work practice and promotes the application of technical skills, with the goal of shaping social workers into planned, standardized executors (Lawler and Bilson 2010; Taylor 2010).

Secondly, organizations consider the 'appropriate application of theory' as a crucial criterion for professional assessment. Referencing theories and techniques in case logs has consequently become a formalized and default guideline. Social workers not only utilize theories to address clients' issues but also view these theories as symbols of professionalism. The inclusion of theories in case logs holds both practical value and symbolic significance. Some social workers expressed anxiety when confronted with organizational assessment tasks, particularly when supervisors inquired about the theoretical underpinnings of interventions or the rationale behind operational procedures. One strategy social workers used to address this challenge was to incorporate more theoretical content as a means of symbolic professionalism. As one interviewee noted,

> People who include more theories in their logs tend to score higher in assessments, as experts hope to see cases where practice and theory are tightly integrated. Therefore, even if we do not consider complex theories while providing services, we will deliberately highlight theory in the case log. (Peng, male)

Thirdly, supervisors often lack critical and innovative guidance when fostering reflective practice amongst social workers. Several interviewees, including some supervisors themselves, stated that professional reflection should include theoretical components but did not explicitly acknowledge the necessity of critical and innovative levels of reflection. This deficiency directly impacts the supervision provided to subordinate social workers. Reflective practice aims to transcend mere knowledge transfer and technical rationality by promoting critical and reflexive thinking. It seeks to cultivate practitioners' awareness of social contexts and their capacity for technical innovation (Sheppard 1998). However, in the current organizational context, social workers are not consistently encouraged to engage in critical reflection on practice or to offer innovative

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

interpretations of theoretical knowledge. This partly explains why theories, techniques, and their applications frequently dominate case logs.

Lack of research skills

For social workers, effectively summarizing experiences through practice and demonstrating effectiveness can be challenging, primarily due to a lack of evaluation skills. Dewey proposed a five-step method of producing knowledge through action and reflection: (1) recognizing problems in practice, (2) refining and analysing problems with experience, (3) proposing possible propositions, (4) applying derived conclusions, and (5) experimental verification (Ixer 1999). Many Chinese social workers commonly perceive the fifth step 'experimental verification' as particularly challenging. This concept requires practitioners to test hypotheses to determine whether experimental conclusions align with their expectations. As an interviewee noted:

> For me, the most challenging aspect is the analysis of the questionnaire data. Our organisation requires us to demonstrate the effectiveness of our services, prompting us to use specific scales for pre- and post-assessments. However, after collecting client questionnaires, I find it difficult to analyse the data due to my lack of professional analysis methods. I often seek assistance from friends in other professions to help me with this. (Dada, female)

Lacking data analysis skills not only limits social workers' ability to demonstrate the effectiveness of their work but also restricts their reflective practices to more creative levels. Munro (1998) argues that experiential philosophies lacking scientific validation are unsustainable; as such, social workers must engage more rigorously in knowledge production.

Lacking research skills further highlights challenges within social work education in China. On the one hand, some social workers lack a formal social work educational background, significantly limiting their critical insights. On the other hand, university social work education in China often prioritizes explaining intervention methods and principles of change, while somewhat neglecting practical training in evaluation work (Bai and Daley 2014; Wu et al. 2016). Moreover, very few social work students with graduate or higher degrees choose to engage in grassroots social work practice.

Excessive idolization of existing theories

Some Chinese social workers hold a blindly worshipful stance towards theory. One interviewee stated, 'We can't criticise theory; how can it be wrong? We just have to do what the theory says' (Lee, female).

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

In Chinese culture, criticism often carries a particular stigma (Bond 1991). Many individuals perceive criticism as negation, blame, and refutation rather than a way of identifying and addressing problems constructively. Consequently, when asked about their reluctance to engage in critical reflection on theory, social workers typically express the belief that challenging established theories is inappropriate. They trust that theories are correct and believe that following prescribed theoretical steps ensures efficacy in practice. This is partly influenced by the exam-oriented education social workers have received.

This perspective highlights social workers' tendency to adopt an uncritical stance towards theory, reflecting their relatively static and conservative view of knowledge. Some scholars argue that social work should prioritize the voices and reflections of practitioners, encouraging them to use critical thinking and engage in knowledge production (Savelchuk et al. 2021). However, we found that many social workers in the current context are reluctant to embrace a critical approach, which may restrict the exploration of new practice methods and hinder the production of practical knowledge. This phenomenon may also be partly attributed to some Chinese social workers lacking a formal background in social work. Six interview participants disclosed that they did not major in social work at university, implicitly identifying themselves as 'outsiders', less confident to critique theories.

Discussion

Developing practice is considered a cornerstone of pursuing professionalism in social work. Reflection is a crucial process for reviewing practice procedures and refining practice wisdom. The current study investigates reflective practices amongst Chinese social workers using qualitative methods, including analysing online case logs and conducting in-depth interviews with experienced practitioners. An analysis of online case logs revealed that Chinese social workers' reflections primarily reflected descriptive accounts of problems encountered by clients and superficial analyses within theoretical frameworks, often lacking deeper exploration of underlying factors and critical reflection on established theories. In-depth interviews with experienced social workers provided insights from organizational, cultural, educational, and epistemological perspectives. This study builds on the findings of Ferguson (2018), Lu and Chen (2022), Taiwo (2022), which highlight that social workers lack critical reflection and struggle to generate new action plans from their reflections. It further advances the understanding of the underlying reasons for insufficient reflection among Chinese social workers.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Theoretical conservative tendency and insufficient reflection

By analysing the reflections in the case logs, we found that the content of social work reflections primarily targets service recipients, professional roles, service techniques, and ethical principles. However, most reflections tended to be descriptive, lacking critical analysis and failing to yield novel solutions. As such, we consider the reflections of Chinese social workers to be 'insufficient'.

In-depth interviews with experienced social work practitioners offer explanations for the 'insufficient' reflections. At the individual level, social workers often lack proficiency in data analysis and synthesis techniques related to research. This deficiency is partly due to their non-specialist educational backgrounds and inadequate training support from social work institutions. At the organizational level, social workers are trained under a framework of technical rationality, where supervisors tend to assess subordinates' work based on the application of theories. This results in social workers viewing theories as tools for embellishing service cases rather than genuinely understanding or critically reflecting on them. At the cultural and epistemological level, Chinese cultural traditions tend to be more conservative than their Western counterparts. This conservative orientation influences both social work and education, potentially contributing to insufficient critical thinking training within the education system and an over-reliance on established theories among social workers. For example, the Confucian philosophy of '*Zhongyong*' emphasizes harmony and risk aversion, which has, to some extent, limited practitioners' capacity for holistic reflective practice (Ruch 2005). Furthermore, certain contextual factors also influence the extent of critical reflection. For instance, when social workers are confronted with challenging cases or difficult clients, or when they work within inclusive organizational environments, they are more likely to engage in critical and insightful reflection (Ruch 2005; Taiwo 2022).

From a professional development standpoint, the field of social work experiences a phenomenon known as 'theoretical conservative tendency'. 'Conservative tendency' is a value orientation characterized by the preservation of existing order, traditional values, and established practices (Gil 1990). In social work, it refers to practitioners' inclination to rely on existing methods rather than actively exploring new intervention models or conceptual frameworks. Many Chinese social workers receive professional training based on Western knowledge frameworks but may lack the confidence or awareness to fully appreciate the potential contributions of their practices when encountering novel findings in local contexts (Bai and Daley 2014). This lack of theoretical consciousness, which we term as 'theoretical conservative tendencies', reflects a failure to engage deeply with valuable practice-based wisdom. Consequently, meaningful insights from practice may be overlooked, and transformative

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

experiences may go uncaptured, hindering the generation of new knowledge and the advancement of the field (Taylor 2010).

An effort to foster the indigenous reflection framework in the Chinese context

Taylor's (2010) reflection framework serves as a reference for evaluating the depth of reflection, based on evidence from Western healthcare practitioners. Through analysing the case logs and in-depth interviews with Chinese practitioners, we found that existing reflection classification is insufficient for interpreting the reflections of Chinese social workers, as it does not fully encompass reflections with Indigenous cultural characteristics. *Renqing* and *guanxi* are essential concepts in Chinese society; in the case logs, we found reflections where social workers utilized these concepts as service techniques to enhance social work practice. However, due to the absence of a comprehensive reflection framework for Chinese social workers, this practice wisdom is currently presented only descriptively. As such, it is necessary to further adapt the current reflection framework to better guide Chinese social workers, and potentially those in other East Asian countries, in their reflective practice.

Cultural factors should be further incorporated into technical, practical, and critical reflections. Technical reflections can examine and synthesize techniques that incorporate indigenous cultural characteristics. Practical reflections can integrate local knowledge into discussions on constructing a practical knowledge system, while critical reflections should assess the influence of local customs, cultural norms, and national identity on professional practice. For example, the cases presented in the results section that utilized *Guanxi* and *Renqing* align with the technical level of reflection, as they demonstrate a practice approach that leverages local customs and traditions.

Implications

The emphasis on theory and reflection in institutional evaluations has raised social workers' awareness of reflection to some degree. However, most social workers' reflections remain in an initial stage. How to effectively promote reflective practices in social workers' daily activities requires further discussion.

Situated reflection based on practice is a crucial aspect of social workers' reflective practices. However, if reflection is focused solely on individual cases, it becomes limited. Bleakley (1999) argues that confining one's thinking to specific situations makes them less sensitive to the world around them, reducing reflection to a routine task rather than a

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

process of discovering differences. Developing deeper reflection requires the consideration of a broader social context. Reflexivity provides valuable inspiration in this regard; it begins with personal and institutional reflection on one's situation and explores the influence of culture, discourse, customs, beliefs, and more on practice (Giddens 1991). It involves reflecting on one's way of thinking.

Social workers undoubtedly have the potential for reflexive thinking. However, the current focus on technical rationality and evidence-based practices may conflict with the development of reflexive thinking. Social work institutions, as facilitators of an inclusive reflective environment and providers of reflective guidance for social workers (Ruch 2005), should advocate for a reflexive thinking framework that aligns with local culture and practice contexts, providing guidance for social workers' reflection. These institutions can organize training courses and workshops tailored to enhance social workers' reflective abilities. These sessions should include in-depth discussions on theoretical knowledge, practical techniques, tools for reflecting on practice experiences, and strategies for integrating reflection into daily work practices. Reflexive thinking can empower social workers to reassess their practice experiences, analyse their thought processes, and reflect on structural constraints. Embracing reflexivity is a crucial step towards refining professional practice in social work.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, a potential sampling bias arises from selecting case logs that contain a 'professional reflection' section while excluding those that do not, which may have inadvertently limited the range of reflections examined. This approach may have inadvertently impacted the range of reflections examined. Additionally, the study did not explore other potential types and frameworks of reflection. For instance, Ruch's (2005) concept of 'process reflection' was not incorporated due to the nature of our data, which primarily consists of one-off reports. Consequently, the exclusion of such frameworks may have constrained the breadth of insights generated by this study. Furthermore, presenting social workers with the initial research findings prior to gathering their feedback may have influenced their responses, particularly in relation to how they engage in reflection.

Conclusion

Research on social workers' reflections holds potential to enhance practitioners' professional abilities and improve the quality of social work

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

development, despite many reflections currently being inadequate. This study offers valuable insights into the current status and characteristics of social workers' reflections in China, which may resonate across various countries and regions. The findings underscore several factors hindering deep reflection amongst social workers in China, including individual, organizational, and epistemological dimensions, which collectively contribute to what can be termed 'theoretical conservative tendency' in professional development. The inadequate reflection by social workers signifies their limited contributions to advancing professionalism and knowledge production processes. Looking ahead, it is important to rethink practice experiences and encourage diverse perspectives to support reflexive practice. A crucial step forward involves the development of a reflective guidance framework that integrates indigenous cultural elements and encourages critical engagement with theory. By empowering social workers with this framework, they can innovate more effectively in their professional endeavours.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Prof. Xuesong He and Prof. Brian Perron for their valuable feedback on this article, as well as the Smartsowo platform and all respondents in the study for their contributions.
Conflictsof interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding

None declared.

References

Bai, J. R., and Daley, J. G. (2014) 'A Snapshot of the Current Status of Social Work Education in Mainland China', *Journal of Social Work Education*, 50: 525–34.

Baikady, R., and Cheng, S. L. (2022) 'Challenges for Social Work Education in China: Findings from Three Metropolises', *Social Work Education*, 41: 34–49.

Baikady, R., Varoshini, N., and Jianguo, G. (2024) 'Understanding Social Work Education in China—A Field Snapshot', *Social Work Education*, 43: 2201–17.

Barbalet, J. (2021) *The Theory of Guanxi and Chinese Society*. London: Oxford University Press.

Bleakley, A. (1999) 'From Reflective Practice to Holistic Reflexivity', *Studies in Higher Education*, 24: 315–30.

Bond, M. H. (1991) *Beyond the Chinese Face: Insights from Psychology*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Bulman, C. (2008) '*Chapter 1: An Introduction to Reflection*', in C. Bulman & S. Schutz (eds) *Reflective Practice in Nursing*, 4th edn. Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications.

Burr, V. et al. (2016) 'Encouraging Self-Reflection in Social Work Students: Using Personal Construct Methods', *British Journal of Social Work*, 46: 1997–2015.

Dewey, J. (1910) *How We Think*. Boston, DC: Heath.

Du, J., and Yao, J. (2015) 'Zhongyong: The Connotation and its Relationship With Collectivism', *Chinese Journal of Management (in Chinese)*, 12: 638–46.

Fei, X., Hamilton, G. G., and Zheng, W. (1992) *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Ferguson, H. (2018) 'How Social Workers Reflect in Action and When and Why They Don't: The Possibilities and Limits to Reflective Practice in Social Work', *Social Work Education*, 37: 415–27.

Fook, J. (1996) *The Reflective Researcher: Social Workers' Theories of Practice Research*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Fook, J. (2002) *Critical Social Work*. London: SAGE.

Fook, J. (2003) 'Critical Social Work: The Current Issues', *Qualitative Social Work*, 2: 123–30.

Furman, R. (2004) 'Using Poetry and Narrative as Qualitative Data: Exploring a Father's Cancer Through Poetry', *Family, Systems & Health*, 22: 162–70.

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gil, D. G. (1990) 'Implications of Conservative Tendencies for Practice and Education in Social Welfare', *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 17: 5–27.

Habermas, J., and Shapiro, J. J. (1971) *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Ixer, G. (1999) 'There is no Such Thing as Reflection', *British Journal of Social Work*, 29: 513–27.

Ke, Z., and Liang, C. (2023) 'Research on the Relationship Between Exam-Oriented Education and Students' Creativity', *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences)(In Chinese)*, 41: 72.

Lam, C. M., Wong, H., and Leung, T. T. (2007) 'An Unfinished Reflexive Journey: Social Work Students' Reflection on their Placement Experiences', *British Journal of Social Work*, 37: 91–105.

Law, A. K. C., and Gu, J. X. (2008) 'Social Work Education in Mainland China: Development and Issues', *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, 2: 1–12.

Lawler, J., and Bilson, A. (2010) *Social Work Management and Leadership: Managing Complexity with Creativity*. London: Routledge.

Lay, K. and McGuire, L. (2010) 'Building a lens for critical reflection and reflexivity in social work education', *Social Work Education*, 29(5), pp. 539–50.

Lu, W., and Chen, J. (2022) 'Reflecting on Mistakes in Practice among Social Workers in China', *The British Journal of Social Work*, 52: 461–79.

Lu, W., Fu, X., and Xu, L. (2023) 'Empirical Reflection: Research on the Reflective Competence in Social Work Practice Education', *Journal of Social Work (In Chinese)*, 40–56.

Maidment, J., and Cooper, L. (2002) 'Acknowledgement of Client Diversity and Oppression in Social Work Student Supervision', *Social Work Education*, 21: 399–407.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026

Manen, M. V. (1995) 'On the Epistemology of Reflective Practice', *Teachers and Teaching*, 1: 33–50.

Mattsson, T. (2014) 'Intersectionality as a Useful Tool: Anti-Oppressive Social Work and Critical Reflection', *Affilia*, 29: 8–17.

Mo, Y. H., Leung, T. L., and Tsui, M. S. (2019) 'Chaos in Order: The Evolution of Social Work Supervision Practice in the Chinese Mainland', *The Clinical Supervisor*, 38: 345–65.

Munro, E. (1998) *Understanding Social Work*. London: Athlone Press.

Occhiuto, K. et al. (2024) 'Reflecting on Reflection in Clinical Social Work: Unsettling a Key Social Work Strategy', *The British Journal of Social Work*, 54: 2642–60.

Ping, L. X. (2012) 'Educating a Reflective and Active Social Worker: How Social Work Education Responds to a Social Problem', *China Journal of Social Work*, 5: 277–83.

Posner, G. J., and Rudnitsky, A. N. (1994) *Course Design: A Guide to Curriculum Development for Teachers*, 4th edn. London: Longman.

Ryding, J., and Wernersson, I. (2019) 'The Role of Reflection in Family Support Social Work and Its Possible Promotion by a Research-Supported Model', *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 16: 322–45.

Ruch, G. (2005) 'Reflective Practice in Contemporary Child-care Social Work: The Role of Containment', *British Journal of Social Work*, 37: 659–80.

Savelchuk, I. et al. (2021) 'Trends in the Development of Social Work: Postmodern Ideas and Prospects', *Postmodern Openings*, 12: 143–54.

Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Book.

Sheppard, M. (1998) 'Practice Validity, Reflexivity and Knowledge for Social Work', *British Journal of Social Work*, 28: 763–81.

Sicora, A. (2010) 'Self-Evaluation of Social Work Practice Through Reflection on Professional Mistakes: Practice Makes "Perfect"?', *Social Work Review*, 4: 153–64.

Sim, T. et al. (2019) 'The Hong Kong Statement on Practice Research 2017: Contexts and Challenges of the Far East', *Research on Social Work Practice*, 29: 3–9.

Taylor, B. (2010) *Reflective Practice for Health Care Professionals: A Practical Guide*. London: McGraw-Hill Education.

Taiwo, A. (2022) 'Social Workers' Use of Critical Reflection', *Journal of Social Work*, 22: 384–401.

Thompson, N., and Pascal, J. (2012) 'Developing Critically Reflective Practice', *Reflective Practice*, 13: 311–25.

Woolgar, S., ed. (1988) *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Sage.

Wu, S. et al. (2016) 'Is Social Work Really Being Recognized? Problems with Social Work Employment Opportunities in Mainland China', *Social Work Education*, 35: 186–203.

© The Author(s) 2025. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers. All rights reserved. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site—for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com.
British Journal of Social Work, 2025, 55, 2937–2956
https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf081
Original article

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/55/6/2937/8148708 by University of Education,Winneba user on 04 November 2026