

The Relationship Between Community Residents' Social Identity and Their Willingness to Volunteer for Social Work Through the Lens of Social Identity Theory: A Case Study Of 100 Community Residents in Meishan City of China

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Abstract. With the continuous development of social work in China, the participation of civil force is indispensable. This paper aims to explore the relationship between the degree of Chinese community residents' social identification with three types of social groups (namely, community residents, social work professionals, and social work recipients) and community residents' willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service through the lens of social identity theory. The purpose of the research is to further apply the conclusions to social work practice in the time to come, so as to encourage more civil force to participate in social work. The research method of this study is a survey by questionnaire. Research results show that the degree of Chinese community residents' social identification with community residents, social work professionals and social work recipients are all positively correlated with their willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service, among which the positive correlation between the degree of Chinese community residents' social identification with social work recipients and their willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service is most significant. This study proves that enhancing community residents' social identification with social work recipients can effectively promote community residents' willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service. In other words, by enhancing community residents' level of social identification with social work recipients in the future, there will be undoubtedly more civil forces encouraged to participate in Chinese social work.

Keywords: Social identity theory, social work, volunteer service.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

If one of the criteria of civilization within a society is the way people treat the weak, how can people's attitudes and behaviors toward the weak be easily changed? After all, what makes people behave differently toward different groups of people, such as the strong and the weak? One might presume that it is because the strong induce deterrence while the weak are powerless. Be that as it may, Social Identity Theory (SIT), introduced by Henri Tajfel, suggests that only when people categorize themselves into different groups and identify with the group they belong to, will they sacrifice their own individual gains and their actions be aimed to achieve the greatest common good for their own group [1]. In this sense, only by making more people realize that they can, at certain moments of their life or from a different angle, fall into the category of the weak group can the whole society's attitude toward the weak be changed.

Social work, as a professional activity to help the disadvantaged (the weak) by providing welfare services, plays an essential role in building an equal and harmonious society nowadays, and it is also closely related to the attitudes of people toward the disadvantaged crowds. However, after decades of development, China's social work still presents problems of unbalanced regional development, low professional levels of talents, and low awareness of the public. Therefore, making more people aware and accept the existence of social work is a route the society must take to further develop China's social work.

On the other hand, in recent years, China's volunteer service has developed vigorously, and the whole society is enthusiastic about participating in volunteer service. According to China Volunteer Service Development Report (2021-2022), cited data from the national volunteer service information system indicates that as of October 30, 2021, there were 217 million volunteers in China, or around 15.4% of the country's total population. This equates to an average of 1,544 volunteers per 10,000 persons [2].

Then, suppose more community residents participate in social work-related volunteer service in China, what will happen? More people in society would get in contact with social work and recognize its existence or even significance, which is beneficial for the development of China's social work and in return help more disadvantaged people. However, the premise is that, from the perspective of SIT, more people must be identified with the social work recipients' group (the weak group of the society). Since only when they identify with the weak group, would they volunteer in the social work-related service to help their own group.

1.2. Research Purpose

This paper aims to testify to one of the arguments of SIT, which is that the stronger people identify themselves with a group, the more resources they would devote to the very group other than some out-groups. To be specific, people are more likely to volunteer for social work-related tasks in order to support the weak group if they identify more with the social work recipients' group (also referred to as the social work service object group). There is a strong correlation between people's sense of group identification and people's intention to make a contribution to the group they identify with. If the research results turn out to be positive, the hypotheses of this paper will serve as a role in future promotion and publicity of China's social work, the recruitment of social work volunteers, and even the expansion of social work professional groups by enhancing their level of identification with the social work recipients.

1.3. Research Method

This study adopts the questionnaire survey methodology and integrates the knowledge of SIT into the questionnaire content design to explore the relationships between Chinese community residents' social identities of three social groups (namely community residents, social work professionals and social work recipients) and community residents' willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service. This is quantitative research with analysis of the collected questionnaire data.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Identity Theory

Since its foundation, Social Identity Theory, a theory originally aimed to explore the causes of social conflicts and inter-group discrimination, has been widely discussed and applied to study how an individual's social identity (or group membership) influences their attitudes, feelings and behaviors towards in-group and the relevant out-group [3]. In the late 1970s and 1980s, Henri Tajfel, John C. Turner and others continued to explain and improve social identity theory. They define "social identity" as "an individual's knowledge of his or her membership in a social group and of something of significant affection and value to him or her as a member of society" [4].

However, for what matters most to this research, during their study in social comparison and ingroup favouritism, J. C. Turner, R.J. Brown, and H. Tajfel also discovered that ingroup biases are not exclusive to conflictual environments, conflict-related characteristics, or the denigration or hate of outgroups. Favouritism by groups with conflicting interests or a history of previous hostility may not, of course, be bias proper. It might be an explanation of the outgroup's true behavior toward the ingroup or a logical strategy to forward the goals of the ingroup [5]. It is through this process that individuals become attached and committed to the particular social group to which they belong.

The development of SIT has exerted great influence on social psychology, providing a new way for social psychologists to think about inter-group relations, and at the same time, the theory is constantly developed and perfected [6]. From the late 1980s to around 2010, Social Identity Theory went through the stage of theoretical enrichment and verification. In recent years, more research has applied SIT as a research framework or psychological perspective to carry out research that validates other fields. For instance, studying behavior in the working environment, organizational behavior, female leadership, fan culture and sports [7-11].

Whereas, until 2023, there are very few research on the application of Social Identity Theory to the development of social work, especially in the Chinese context.

2.2. The Studies on Social Work in China

2.2.1 Definition of social work

Social work is a kind of professional helping activities in essence, which is characterized by providing scientific and effective services to people in need, especially to groups in difficulty. Social work focuses on the needs of the recipients and uses scientific helping skills as a means to achieve the effectiveness of aiding others [12].

2.2.2 The status quo and social work identification in China

Social work, as an imported product from the West countries, has undergone more than 30 years of localization process in China, and has experienced three stages of institutionalization, legalization, project and bureaucracy [13]. The institutional system is becoming much more perfect, and the public service fields such as childcare and protection, elderly care, social assistance, youth development, and community correction continue to be deeply cultivated, demonstrating the value of social work. However, there remains a gap between the status quo and the central government's goal of accelerating the construction of a modern social services system, enhancing the ability to guarantee people's livelihood, strengthening and innovating social management, and the people's ever-growing demand for social services [14]. In addition, obstacles like imbalanced regional development, imperfect professional systems and lack of performance evaluation mechanisms of social work remain to be overcome in China. Social workers face many difficulties, such as complex personnel structure, uneven quality, low income, and obscure social positioning [15]. On the other hand, from the perspective of practitioners, the study found that college students in China are generally in the middle level of professional identification of social work, but in the aspects of emotion, value concepts and professional and career choice, the score level is low [16]. There are still some problems in China's social work, such as the unsound structure of talent teams and serious brain drain. Surveys in cities such as Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou show that nearly 20 percent of social workers quit their jobs every year. The high turnover rate undoubtedly limits the healthy and stable development of the social work industry [17].

3. Methodology

Social Identity Theory is the theory adapted for this research and the research method is a questionnaire survey.

3.1. Variables

The independent variable (IV)s of this study includes 1. Community residents' level of social identification with community residents; 2. Community residents' level of social identification with social work professionals; 3. Community residents' level of social identification with social work recipients.

The dependent variable (DV) of this study is the willingness of community residents to participate in social work-related volunteer service.

The controllable variable (CV)s in this study include age, gender, education background and occupation.

3.2. Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Community residents' level of social identification with community residents is positively correlated with their willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service.

Hypothesis 2: Community residents' level of social identification with social work professionals is positively correlated with their willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service.

Hypothesis 3: Community residents' level of social identification toward social work recipients is positively correlated with their willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service.

Hypothesis 4: Among all the three social identities, community residents' level of social identification with social work recipients is most strongly correlated with their willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service.

3.3. Data Collection

Meishan city of Sichuan province in China is chosen for this survey as it is a relatively small and under-developed city in West China in the sense that the concept of social work is not so familiar to many of the community residents compared with other Chinese mega-cities.

The questionnaire survey is divided into three parts: (1) Introduction to the survey; (2) Personal information data (CV) collection; (3) Data collection of independent variables and dependent variables. Community residents' social identification level was measured using a single-item scale method in two articles as the authors had proved its validity and reliability [18,19]. The scale table in *Applying an Extended Theory of Planned Behavior to Examine State-branded Food Product Purchase Behavior: The Moderating Effect of Gender* was adopted to measure the willingness of community residents to participate in social work-related voluntary service [20]. Modified questions for scale measurement are shown in Table 1.

The answer options are set to a 7-point Likert scale.

In this study, the convenience sampling method was adopted to distribute questionnaires online and intercept visits offline.

Table 1. Modified Questions for Scale Measurement

	Questions	Referenced Articles
Original Question	Do you (strongly) identify with the X group?	<i>A Single-item Measure of Social Identification: Reliability, Validity, and Utility; Further Validation of A Single-item Measure of Social Identification</i>
Modified Question 1	To what extent do you identify with the residents of this community?	
Modified Question 2	To what extent do you identify with the social work professionals?	
Modified Question 3	To what extent do you identify with the social work recipients?	
Original Question	I intend to buy X when I go grocery shopping in the future	<i>Applying an Extended Theory of Planned Behavior to Examine State-branded Food Product Purchase Behavior: The Moderating Effect of Gender</i>
Modified Question 4	To what extent do you intend to volunteer in social work to help social work recipients in the future?	
Original Question	I will expend effort on buying X when I go grocery shopping in the future.	
Modified Question 5	To what extent are you going to expend effort in social work volunteering in the future?	

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Data

A total of 138 responses were collected and 100 are valid. There are 48 male residents and 52 female residents. There are 8 residents aged 18 to 25, 47 residents aged 25 to 40, 32 residents aged 40 to 60, and 13 residents aged 60 and over. The education level of the residents is divided into 13 junior high schools and below, 21 senior high schools, 58 college or undergraduate students, and 8 postgraduate students and above. In terms of occupation, 9% of the population are from the education and medical industry, 29% are corporate employees, 16% are from the government, 15% are freelancers, and 31% are self-employed individuals.

4.2. Mean Value

The results show that the mean value of community residents' degree of social identification for community residents (IV1) is 5.19, and the standard deviation is 1.228. The mean value of community residents' degree of social identification with social work professionals (IV2) is 5.25, and the standard deviation is 1.192. The mean value and standard deviation of community residents' degree of social identification for social work recipients (IV3) is 5.19 and 1.269. For the dependent variable (DV), the mean value and standard deviation of community residents' willingness to participate in social work volunteer service is 5.24 and 1.09747.

4.3. Pearson Correlation

The correlation between age, gender, educational background, occupation and the dependent variable of community residents' willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service is shown in Table 2. Among all the control variables, only the occupation of community residents has a significant positive correlation with their willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service (Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.381, p value <0.001).

Table 2. Pearson Correlation between Control Variables (CV) and Dependent Variable (DV)

		CV 1	DV
Gender	Pearson Correlation	1	.055
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.584
Intention to Volunteer	Pearson Correlation	.055	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.584	
		CV 2	DV
Education Level	Pearson Correlation	1	-.148
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.141
Intention to Volunteer	Pearson Correlation	-.148	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.141	
		IV 3	DV
Profession	Pearson Correlation	1	.381**
	Sig.(2-tailed)		<.001
Intention to Volunteer	Pearson Correlation	.381**	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	<.001	

The Pearson correlation coefficients between independent variable 1, community residents' degree of social identification with the community residents' group, plus independent variable 2, community residents' degree of social identification with social work professionals' group, and dependent variable community residents' willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service are respectively 0.273, $P <0.006$, and 0.278, $P <0.005$ as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation between Independent Variable 1 (IV1) and Independent Variable 2 (IV2) and Dependent Variable (DV)

		IV1	DV
Social Identification Level with Community Residents	Pearson Correlation	1	.273**
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.006
Intention to Volunteer	Pearson Correlation	.273**	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.006	
		IV 2	DV
Identification Level with Social Work Professionals	Pearson Correlation	1	.278**
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.005
Intention to Volunteer	Pearson Correlation	.278**	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.005	

As shown in Table 4, the Pearson correlation coefficient between independent variable 3, community residents' degree of social identification with social work service recipients and the dependent variable, community residents' willingness to participate in social work-related volunteer service, was 0.406, $P < 0.001$.

Table 4. Correlations between Independent Variable 3(IV3) and Dependent Variable (DV)

		IV3	DV
Identification Level with Social Work Recipients	Pearson Correlation	1	.406**
	Sig.(2-tailed)		<.001
Intention to Volunteer	Pearson Correlation	.406**	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	<.001	

5. Conclusion

The results of this study show that Chinese community residents' degree of social identification with community residents, social work professionals and social work recipients is positively correlated with their willingness to participate in social work volunteer service, among which the positive correlation between community residents' level of social identification with social work recipients and their willingness to participate in social work volunteer service is the most significant. The research proves that enhancing community residents' degree of social identification with social work recipients can effectively enhance the willingness of community residents to volunteer in social work service. Moreover, it can be inferred that uplifting community residents' level of social identification with the group of social work recipients has a significantly greater effect on enhancing the willingness of social residents to participate in social work volunteer service than enhancing community residents' social identification with the groups of community residents and social work professionals. As for the reason why the effect of the profession as the control variable correlated to their intention to volunteer but no other CVs, probably is because the lower a person's subjective social status, the less it contributes to the social identity group. A profession is a symbol of social status and people in lower-status professions all confess that they do not have much off-work time to volunteer.

There are two limitations to this study. First, samples are only collected in a relatively small city in China. In the future, samples can be collected successively in multiple cities to expand the data of sample size, so as to further verify the research conclusions of this paper. Second, the purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between community residents' level of social identification with social work recipients and their participation in social work volunteer service. Therefore, only a single-item scale is used to measure social identity, but it cannot explore the specific details of the social identity of the questionnaire respondents, such as their sense of dignity, pride and psychological

dependence on their own groups. Detailed research can also be conducted on different components of the survey respondents' social identification with the social work recipients' group.

The results of this study confirm an important conclusion of social identity theory: the stronger people's social identification with a group, the more they are willing to allocate resources or contribute to that group. This is consistent with the conclusion of many previous studies. Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is not to prove the correctness of social identity theory, but to utilize social identity theory to promote the development of social work in China. There is a significant positive correlation between community residents' social identification with social work recipients and their participation in social work-related volunteer service, which means that social identity theory can be used for mass communication in the years to come to make more community residents realize that they and the people around them may become social work recipients under certain circumstances, at different times in their lives or from different perspectives of observation. Taking this as a breakthrough point, the publicity of China's social work should be carried out in order to enhance the social awareness of China's social work while also strengthening the professional talents and volunteer service forces of China's social work.

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