

To explore the intermediary influence mechanism of occupational prestige and interpersonal alienation of funeral workers and the construction of related models

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Abstract. Through a questionnaire survey of students and their parents in school and 36 front-line employees in a funeral management office in China, this paper investigates the mediating role of the psychological stress of funeral practitioners in the relationship between professional prestige and interpersonal alienation. The results show that: (1) High professional prestige cannot directly reduce interpersonal alienation; (2) The psychological pressure of funeral practitioners partially mediates the influence of their professional prestige on interpersonal alienation, and the mediating variable model of initial professional prestige on interpersonal alienation is revised. Finally, it explains the deficiency of this research and its practical value. The conclusion of this study provides certain reference value and guiding significance for solving the psychological stressors of funeral workers, promoting interpersonal communication, and deepening the public's correct cognition of funeral workers' professional prestige.

Keywords: Professional prestige; Psychological pressure; Interpersonal alienation; Funeral workers.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Although the seventh national census was conducted in China in 2020, the official results have not yet been released because of a substantial increase in the number of more detailed information and census bulletins [1]. However, according to relevant forecasts, China's total population will exceed 1.4 billion. In 2019, China's death population has reached 9.98 million, with a mortality rate of 8%-9%. Moreover, in recent years, China's birth rate has been declining year after year, while the mortality rate and total death population are gradually increasing [2]. This has brought a lot of invisible pressure to the funeral staff who undertake the work of corpse disposal. Due to the special nature of their work, the funeral industry has left a dirty and unlucky stereotype to the world for a long time, and the funeral staff has been excluded from the mainstream of society by the public. No matter in social situations or in marriage and love situations, people are far away from it, and even reluctant to mention it, which leads to a negative evaluation of the professional reputation of funeral staff. This leads to the phenomenon of interpersonal alienation. Although the modern funeral industry has made great progress, the psychological stress of funeral workers who deal with corpses every day is often ignored by the public.

As far as the existing literature is concerned, regarding the relationship between professional prestige and interpersonal alienation of funeral workers, such as the well-known domestic research papers "Research on Psychological Adjustment of Funeral Social Work Involved in Funeral Business" and "Research on Social Adaptation of Funeral Work", scholars Ren Jialun and Ja Lili both discussed the factors of social adaptability of funeral workers and introduced social intervention mechanism to improve them. Or from the traditional funeral system, from the perspective of cultural customs [3,4], and how professional prestige affects interpersonal alienation is a "black box" to be further studied. Furthermore, in the empirical research on the occupational prestige of this profession in the past, Xiong Ying mainly paid attention to the occupational prestige investigation of funeral workers, but did not deeply explore the intermediary mechanism between the occupational prestige and interpersonal alienation, which is far from enough to provide guidance for the currently excluded funeral work circle [5]. Therefore, whether the professional prestige of funeral workers is directly

related to the increase or decrease of their interpersonal alienation, and whether their psychological stressors will affect the active interpersonal alienation mechanism of funeral workers? This is the problem that this study will discuss and ponder.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The construction of influence mechanism model of occupational prestige on interpersonal alienation

2.1.1 The direct influence of funeral staff's professional prestige on interpersonal alienation

Professional prestige was first established by sociologists Max Weber, in his opinion, social stratification. It should be investigated from three aspects: wealth, power and prestige [6], that is, professional prestige refers to the subjective evaluation of the profession made by the public and the comprehensive view of its social status. The influencing factors that determine its professional prestige are mainly the working conditions and socio-economic power of the incumbent, including the professional working environment, quality requirements and salary income. Interpersonal alienation refers to the negative emotion caused by the change of interpersonal relationship, and the individual gradually alienates from the group. This paper collects and integrates the relevant literature on the working environment, quality requirements and salary income of funeral workers, and combined with the public's views on this profession, analyzes how it determines the professional prestige of funeral workers and then affects interpersonal alienation, and puts forward corresponding assumptions based on this theory.

As far as the working environment is concerned, front-line workers in the funeral industry, such as fire chemical industry, they must witness the remains with their own eyes every day, and basically stay in a high-temperature environment all the time. The internal temperature of the cremation furnace is as high as 800 to 1,000 degrees, which makes the indoor temperature at least 40 to 50 degrees or even higher. During the rest of the cremation work, they all need to constantly replenish a lot of water, otherwise they are likely to dehydrate in the cremator room and faint. Moreover, sometimes the body will suffer from nervous twitch due to the stimulation of high temperature, such as turning over or sitting up suddenly, which causes great psychological pressure on the funeral staff with poor psychological quality. For example, the undertaker, they must personally contact with all kinds of corpses every day. From cleaning to massaging stiff corpses, from injecting preservatives to trimming hair, the whole process is carried out in an environment full of cold air and peculiar smell. Moreover, the workplace is in a sparsely populated suburb, and the working environment is accompanied by sorrows and cries. [4] In such a dirty working environment, as the public, it is taboo, fearful and repulsive. Li Guihong, a funeral front-line worker and an undertaker, once said in an interview: "In daily life, I will take the initiative to avoid a series of festive activities, such as the marriage of friends and relatives or the full moon of children. Every day, apart from going to work, I will stay at home and meet my acquaintances, and people are afraid to shake hands with me. [7] " It is clearly that the public's views on funeral workers have brought her troubles in life, and when walking on the road, they will be far bypassed, and they will have to bear others' pointing fingers behind their backs, so they can't live like normal people. In the long run, they will take the initiative to keep a distance from the public, and funeral workers default to secular prejudice and automatically disconnect from society, making it difficult to integrate into normal life[4], which leads to an increase in their sense of interpersonal alienation. Moreover, in Ren Jiawei's Investigation on the psychological Research of funeral workers, it is found that this professional group is difficult to be accepted by the other party in their marriage and love situation, and the alienation from them by the public makes them generally take the form of internal solutions in the industry, especially when both men and women are funeral workers[3]. In addition, the public's view of this profession has also caused the alienation of family relations. Due to the nature and environment of work, many families of funeral workers don't understand their work, which leads to the tension of family relations. Some families of workers with

children also have problems with their children's education[3]. Therefore, the public's evaluation of the working environment of funeral workers has had a negative impact on their professional prestige, thus increasing the sense of interpersonal alienation of funeral workers.

As far as salary income and quality requirements are concerned, although with the progress of the times, some universities will offer courses such as funeral science, life and death science, etc. Even in the United States, it is necessary to obtain a practice certificate, complete university studies and pass exams, and sometimes take courses such as psychology and funeral service law. However, in the past, this skill was generally passed down from generation to generation in the family, and it was carried out under the mode of mentoring similar to that of husband and wife walking together or handed down from generation to generation. The educational level was not very high, and the entry threshold was extremely low. They only needed to master the basic remains disposal technology, and they could be employed immediately. Moreover, because few people are willing to do this kind of work, their income is relatively rich. This dirty job is a good choice for people with poor family and low education level. Coupled with the emergence of profiteering monopoly in this industry before, the funeral industry has always been regarded as "doing things for the living and earning money for the dead" [4], so the public has always been far away from and excluded from this, and this traditional stereotype has always surrounded this industry. Therefore, the public's stereotype of funeral workers' economic income and educational level has a negative impact on their professional prestige, thus increasing their sense of interpersonal alienation.

To sum up, I propose hypothesis 1: The high professional prestige of funeral workers can reduce their sense of interpersonal alienation.

2.1.2 Mediating variables of funeral workers' professional prestige affecting interpersonal alienation

Yang Dong, Zhang Jinfu and Huang Xiting have constructed a theoretical model of alienation, which holds that alienation includes interpersonal alienation, social alienation and environmental alienation [8]. The operational definition of interpersonal alienation is all kinds of negative emotions generated by individuals due to the alienation of normal relationships between individuals and the surrounding people, society, nature and themselves, and even being dominated and controlled by objects [9]. However, among many interpersonal alienation theories, American psychologist Bronfenbrenner's (1974) theory of human development ecology has attracted much attention, which emphasizes the importance of individuals' "development in the environment"[10]. Among them, "natural environment" refers to the social environment with a certain degree of correlation with individuals. That is, the social circle of the funeral staff involved in this study, including relatives and friends, which are important to the funeral staff. In addition, Lerner (1982) put forward the theory of development situation based on this ecological theory and regarded the interaction between the constantly developing and changing ecological environment in which individuals live as the foothold and concern of his theory. His theory includes not only the social environment mentioned by Bronfenbrenner (1974), but also the physical environment [11]. For example, the working environment of funeral workers, this theory further holds that there are interactions among various environmental factors that affect individual development, and they change with time. For example, under the influence of the dirty working environment, the funeral staff have psychological pressure, and when they return home, their families don't understand their special work, or their relatives and friends get married and other festive activities will exclude them. The outside world's uncertainty about their professional reputation further strengthens the psychological pressure of the funeral staff. This vicious circle makes individuals on the verge of psychological breakdown with the passage of time, which makes them far away from social circles and further increases their sense of interpersonal alienation. In addition, Ren Fei, a scholar, mentioned in "Career Feelings and Influencing Factors of Young People in Funeral Industry" that in the interview, an interviewee said his personal experience: "Go back to work at night. When the taxi driver heard about going to the funeral home, he didn't want to take me. [12]" Such situations make these funeral practitioners feel the pressure of professional prestige from the society. At the same time, from Ren Jiawei's investigation on the psychological

status of funeral practitioners in H city, funeral practitioners in H city work hard every day, and repetitive boring work can easily make them lose their enthusiasm for life, and their emotions are easily infected by the families of the deceased, resulting in greater psychological pressure [3]. Based on the above theories and literature, it is clearly that the professional prestige of funeral workers will indeed affect the sense of interpersonal alienation through their own psychological pressure.

To sum up, I put forward hypothesis 2: The professional prestige of funeral workers affects their interpersonal alienation through psychological pressure.

Figure 1 provides the relationship between the three variables in the hypothetical situation: there is a negative correlation between professional prestige and interpersonal alienation, and professional prestige can also mediate interpersonal alienation through psychological pressure.

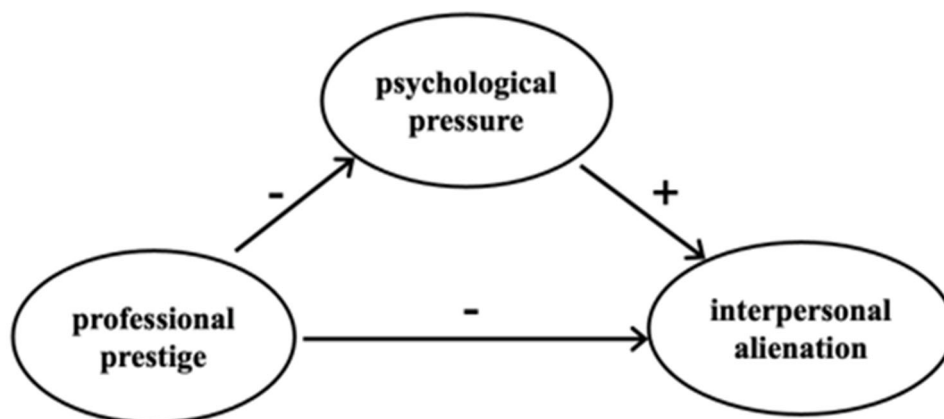


Figure 1. The Hypothetical model

3. Research methods

3.1 Research tools and objects

In this study, the second-hand data analysis method and questionnaire survey method are used. The second-hand data analysis method mainly collects documents and analyzes them through HowNet and Google Scholar, while the questionnaire survey method mainly distributes questionnaires to students in schools and their parents, as well as frontline employees in Liuzhou Funeral Management Office of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. A total of 180 questionnaires were collected, including 156 valid questionnaires, with a recovery rate of 86.7%. A total of 11 questions were set, all of which adopted the way of single-choice questions, mainly from the aspects of social contribution, quality requirements and economic income of funeral workers, to collect the public's views on the profession and comprehensively consider its professional prestige. The questionnaire for front-line employees mainly adopts Likert's five-point scoring method, which is divided into "Very Disagree", "Relatively Disagree", "Average", "Relatively Agree" and "Very Agree", and the scores are 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 points in turn. The questionnaire is designed from two aspects of social environment and physical environment, and the psychological stressors caused by their work are explored through the scores. The questionnaire is distributed to the front-line workers of Liuzhou Funeral Management Office. This management office was established in 1968, which is mainly engaged in funeral services. Up to now, it has been providing excellent services for customers for 53 years, with 40 registered people, including 36 front-line employees. A total of 29 questionnaires were collected, of which 25 were valid, with a recovery rate of 86.2%.

3.2 Research tools and objects

According to the questionnaire distributed by the public, the sample age is between 20 and 50 years old, and the opinions of people of different ages on the economic income, quality requirements and social contribution of the industry are integrated. First, the survey results of "your evaluation of the economic income of this industry" show that 68.52% people choose the "high income" option,

nearly 25% people think it is "middle income or low income", and only about 5% people choose "profiteering". The current public thinks that the economic income of this industry is still considerable, while the stereotype of "profiteering" occupation in the old days has been greatly changed, so the professional reputation is well evaluated in terms of economic income. Secondly, in "What do you think are the entry conditions for this industry?" The statistical results show that 46.3% think it is necessary to have certain academic qualifications, and 39% think it is necessary to have medical qualifications and professional background. With the continuous development of the times, the public's evaluation of the cultural level of the industry has been obviously improved, so the professional reputation is equally impressive in terms of quality requirements. Finally, in the evaluation of people's social contribution to funeral workers, more than half of them think that this profession has made some contribution to society. On the contrary, however, in the question "Are you willing to marry people in this field?" The survey results show that more than 70% people choose to refuse. According to the results of the above data, the public supports the economic income, quality requirements and social contribution of the funeral workers, and holds a positive attitude, which is obviously different from the stereotype of the workers in the industry in the past. The public's attention and views on the funeral industry have been greatly improved, which has made the practitioners in this industry alienated and ignored from the past, and now they can become the executors of people's livelihood projects with the spirit of social contribution. Their professional prestige has been greatly improved, but it still happens from time to time that they are not seen in their marriage and love situations. Therefore, the high professional prestige cannot effectively reduce the interpersonal alienation of funeral workers.

Therefore, the hypothesis 1 that "the professional prestige of funeral workers has a direct impact on their interpersonal alienation" is not supported by this study.

According to the results of the questionnaire distributed by front-line funeral workers, the result of the question "work content brings inconvenience to interpersonal communication" shows that the option of "very much agree" accounts for the most, with 9 people choosing this option and 7 people choosing "relatively agree". Among the questions of "work content has a certain impact on families" and "rarely participate in activities such as wedding banquets", the number of "very agree" is 10. As many as 17 people choose "very much agree" in the question of "rarely talking about work content with relatives and friends", and 13 people choose "very much agree" in the question of "work content has certain influence on their marriage and love situation", all of which are more than half of them, indicating that the industry has indeed had some influence on their life circle. As far as the working environment is concerned, among the "inconveniences caused by working environment", 7 people choose "I don't quite agree" and 8 people choose "I generally agree". To sum up, the physical environment has little impact on funeral workers. With the rapid development of science and technology, the facilities and location selection of funeral homes are relatively comprehensive and convenient. On the contrary, prejudice from the society still exists, and practitioners in this industry will be forced by this pressure and choose to actively alienate festive activities such as gatherings of friends and relatives and they are reluctant to mention their own work in daily life. Therefore, the funeral staff are often affected in their daily life due to their special work nature, especially in their love and marriage. After hearing the work content, the other party inevitably has a bad feeling about their profession, and their professional prestige is affected in this respect. Over time, whenever the funeral staff encounter such things, they will have inferiority complex and take the initiative to alienate interpersonal social activities, thus increasing their sense of interpersonal alienation.

Therefore, the hypothesis 2 that "the professional prestige of funeral workers affects their interpersonal alienation through psychological pressure" is partially supported by this study.

Figure 2 presents the relationship between the three modified variables: professional prestige indirectly affects interpersonal alienation through the psychological pressure of the intermediary variables.



Figure 2. The modified mechanism

4. Conclusion

In this study, the structural equation model is adopted, and the direct and indirect effects of professional reputation of funeral practitioners on their interpersonal alienation are considered at the same time. By fitting the model with sample data, the final revised model is obtained by data deduction hypothesis. The results show that the professional reputation of funeral workers does not directly affect their sense of interpersonal alienation, and high professional reputation does not directly reduce it. When psychological pressure is introduced as an intermediary variable, it can be seen from the data that the public's evaluation of funeral workers has changed a lot, but some social prejudices that have damaged their reputation still exist, especially in marriage and love, and in daily life, people in this industry will try their best to avoid talking about the work content, so psychological stressors from the social environment are inevitable and professional reputation will indeed cause it. In the past, the lack of research on the relationship between professional prestige and interpersonal alienation may be due to the failure to find and introduce suitable variables.

The good mechanism model and conclusion obtained in this study can provide certain reference value and guiding significance for solving the psychological stressors of funeral workers, promoting interpersonal communication, and deepening the public's correct cognition of funeral workers' professional prestige. At the same time, it is necessary to increase the positive publicity of practitioners in this industry, and further promote the process of social intervention in the mode of psychological stress measures for funeral workers. In modern civilization, the legal profession is dirty or not, and funeral work is also a profession and an indispensable existence of human society.

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