

Leadership in Social Work: Basis for Promotion of The Heads of Social Work Institutions in China

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Abstract: The call for studies on social work leadership has been raised since then. Various leadership models from the business literature were adopted in social work literature but had not been analyzed thoroughly to determine their appropriateness with social work mission and values to advance the social work agenda. In China, nearly 8,000 social work service organizations (SWSOs) were developed quickly in the end of 2017 which offered both opportunities and challenges for social work administrators who were observed to practice transformational leadership often. Apparently, a Chinese version of transformational leadership was developed by Li & Shi (2005) based on the four-factor structure anchored on Chinese culture of moral integrity, leadership charm, vision motivation, and individualized consideration which was the study's framework. The study investigated the transformational leadership of heads in social work institutions in China as basis for their promotion. This inquiry filled a perceived gap in the scant literature regarding leadership of Chinese social work heads. Also, it analyzed the organizational conditions and management of heads in social work institutions. The study involved 193 heads from 5 social work institutions in China who were mostly female with 1-5 years of service as a professional social worker with specialized educational background. Through quantitative descriptive, comparative, and correlational methods, the results showed that social work leaders always experienced transformational leadership. However, the heads presented numerous challenges that called for improved guidelines on their promotion. Thus, the output of the study was developed.

Keywords: Promotion of Social Work Heads; Social Work; Social Workers in China; Transformational Leadership.

1. Introduction

Leadership is operated by vision, innovation, power, creativity, and inspiration. It drives the processes, motivation, and determination of organizations in realizing their objectives. For this reason, leaders are characterized as creative, risk takers, innovators, and developers for they bring in their entrepreneurial abilities and leadership framework to address the need of an organization (Sullivan, 2016).

According to Peters (2018), leadership has been a significant subject in business literature and recently in social sciences. Theories of leadership proliferated since the early 20th century. In fact, traditional behavioral based leadership is one of the most prominent leadership theories related to individual cognitive processes. Others are transformational, leader-member, charismatic and cross-cultural leadership which focused on individual aspects and on relationships and organization processes. Also, feminist leadership promoted diversity in the workplace and more-exclusive leadership behaviors, while social justice leadership particularly in education research surfaced.

Meanwhile, new leadership models such as ethical leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership and transformational leadership are found empirically related and redundant. Studies suggest that these newer leadership models add little incremental validity beyond transformational leadership in predicting various leadership outcomes. Thus, transformational leadership demonstrates medium to large effect sizes on a range of individual, team, and organizational outcomes (Deng, 2023).

However, the concept of leadership emphasizes on nearly superhuman traits that imply concentration of power on the person on top of the organization which can be a concern in social work institutions. For Sullivan (2016), there is a

potential danger on the belief that only great people in power and politics are worthy of the leadership which contrasts the mundane concept that leadership is a managing work of other people. For Fisher (2009), leadership topics are not often covered outside of social work classrooms or beyond textbook readings because many leadership positions in social service agencies are handled by professionals from other fields and therefore studied by academics in other fields. Thus, the call for studies on social work leadership has been raised since then.

An increase of social workers moving to leadership position was a result of expansion of specialized human services programs and organization which started in the middle of 1960s. New leadership models and theories were developed for these roles outside the field but with great appeal and utility. Models focused on the value of widespread participation in the development of organizational goals and overall decision making became particularly attractive including in the traditional business and industry. These models targeted the specific needs of the workforce while motivating the same individuals to mobilize for the key organizational goals and its compelling mission (McAllan & MacRae, 2010).

Various leadership models from the business literature were adopted in social work literature but had not been analyzed thoroughly to determine their appropriateness with social work mission and values to advance the social work agenda. Peters (2018) systematically located and analyzed peer-reviewed articles on theories and models of leadership described and linked to social work research and practice. As a result, a collection of interrelated leadership principles on the practice, purpose and mission of social work became the starting point for further development of a definition of social work leadership.

In terms of research, social work leaderships lacked basis on the leadership on organization and culture considering that social work has a strong person-in-environment approach. Apparently, a significant amount of information on organizational context of social work leadership was provided in reviewed articles including the interrelatedness of organizational, interactional and individual levels of leadership. Specifically, individual leadership behaviors are influenced and supported by the whole team of co-workers and administration considering policy and funding availability (Elpers & Westhuis, 2008). Moreover, the underlying discourses of openness to emotional expression and the integration of diverse knowledge and experience in order to effect positive change shaped the culture and climate of an organization and became instrumental in determining the ability of individuals to be effective social work leaders. In other words, leadership is formed due to the human change and growth and social work leadership benchmarks in understanding of others' assets and deficits, being able to effectively process emotions, and accepting others unconditionally (Holosko, 2009).

On the other hand, recommendations for leadership training in interprofessional contexts were recognized in some studies to teach social workers on how to maintain their role and highlight their critical contribution to public service while collaborating with other human services professions. Research focused on the desired effects of leadership was encouraged among social work leadership researchers to make changes in an organization and to demonstrate effective social work leadership. Researchers were discouraged to assess differences in personality or cultural background of potential leaders. Rather, look into the underlying assumptions in an organization that may prevent formal and informal leaders from affecting positive change or even attempting to make changes in their behavior, their relationships or their organizations (Lawler & Bilson, 2013).

In China, nearly 8,000 social work service organizations (SWSOs) were developed quickly in the end of 2017 which offered both opportunities and challenges for social work administrators. They were observed to practice transformational leadership more often (Deosiers, 2015; Yu et al., 2020;) in bringing more innovation and motivating employees' organizational citizenship behavior to overcome such challenges. Thus, transformational leadership was examined, in different areas throughout China, to have great impacts in the organizational citizenship behavior through workplace social capital and professional autonomy (Zhang et al., 2020).

In early 2020, the social workers in Wuhan, China were greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic so they developed and implemented the '4 + 1' model as an effective interventional model integrating online and offline volunteers of multiple professions to support affected individuals in the process of battling the pandemic. Similarly, they widely adopted transformational social work leadership consistently because of its charismatic, behavioral, inspirational intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration influence (Yu et al., 2020).

And recently, it was found out that social workers behaviors in high-innovation climate environments, such as in mainland, China were influenced by ethical and servant leadership. This was the result when their innovation in community-level social work institutions was studied using situational leadership theory. These important strategies

prove the potential of social work innovation practices in stimulating innovation effects of leadership (Song et al., 2022). However, the leadership styles of administrators in social work organizations have been understudied (Deosiers, 2015).

Thus, the study investigated the leadership of heads in social work institutions in China as basis for their promotion. This inquiry filled a perceived gap in the scant literature regarding leadership of Chinese social work heads. Also, it analyzed the organizational conditions and management of heads in social work institutions. According to China Daily, the social work department head is tasked to promote voluntary service, train social workers, respond to public complaints, manage industrial associations and administer grassroots communities (Jia, 2023). Thus, the analysis focused on the heads' transformational leadership in social work institutions which could be a significant basis of their promotion. The aspiration was to combine an individual perspective that focused on the heads and their managerial work with a structural focus on how social work management was affected by organizational conditions and changes.

2. Significance of the Study

The following individuals or groups may potentially benefit from the proposed study:

Administrators. This study provides a deeper insight and appreciation of input received from the members of their institution is particularly beneficial to heads of social work institutions. Equal benefit may be received by administrators such as directors, managers, supervisors, and coordinators. The research results may display their clear goals in fulfilling their leadership roles.

Social Workers. This study may provide opportunities for social workers to discover their leader potential according to the principles of transformational leadership. This may also shed light on the promotion as future heads or administrators of social work institutions.

Institutional Policy Makers. The results of the study is a basis for promotion of heads in social work institutions. Thus, institutional policy makers may refer to the research output in modifying or developing their promotional guidelines for social workers professional development.

Local Government. Social work is built from grassroots and communities. The officers and staff of the local government may be provided of the expected roles of head social workers to effectively collaborate with them the goals and plans for the communities.

Community Organizations. The analysis of this research may be used by community organizations in understanding the roles and potentials of social workers which may be instrumental in their partnership in community development.

Academe. The study's results may be useful for academic administrators and faculty in recognizing social workers as their partner in providing social awareness and responsibilities to academic stakeholders.

Scholars and Researchers. Scholars in the disciplines of education, social sciences, and related field might use the outcomes of the research to further investigate the leadership in social work.

3. Definition of Terms

The following terms and concepts are defined operationally based on the study's objectives and purpose:

Community. Social work is rooted in community – a socially interdependent group of people who share best practices and collaborate in discussion and decision making to nurture and define the community. Its concept is charged on human emotions, personal identification, and symbolic construction by people. It involves a system of values, norms, and moral codes which provoke a sense of identity to its members (Hardcastle et al., 2004).

Empowering. It is an important aspect of transformational leadership that delegates tasks and responsibilities to followers and empower them in decision making and taking actions that support the vision. It is the way for transformational leaders to gain autonomy, authority and resources in performing their roles and trusting them to do their best.

Idealized Influence. It is an element in transformational leadership that provides insights and awareness of the mission, encourages pride, and increases respect and trust insubordinates (Bass & Avolio, 2007). In this study it is recognized as a characteristic practiced by social workers and heads of the social work institutions.

Intellectual Stimulation. It is an assumption that transformational leaders has the extent to take risks and solicit ideas from their followers. It is instrumental in recognizing the followers' creativity and innovation.

Individualized Consideration. It is an element in transformational leadership the gives attention, fosters, guides, and trains each person specifically and personally (Bass & Avolio, 2007). It is a variable in the proposed study to assess the heads of social work institutions.

Inspirational Motivation. It is the growing high expectations through the use of symbols to focus efforts and communicate important goals in a simple way (Bass & Avolio, 2007).

Social Work. It is a service carried out by trained professionals to assist the socially disadvantaged members of the community. In the proposed study, it is the work of the participants which gives them sufficient knowledge and experience to contribute in the research.

Social Workers. They are professionals who help enhance the overall well-being of the members of the community and help meet their basic and complex needs. In the proposed study, they are the target participants because they are managed by the heads in the social work institutions.

Social Work Institutions. These are non-government organizations that deliver social work services to the people or communities. They commonly create programs to uplift the lives of the members of their community. In this study, these are the selected research rationale to improve the leadership roles of their heads.

Transformational Leadership. It is a developmental process that requires a long period of time, where each part involves the past and present (Bass, 1995). It is a variable in the proposed study to assess the heads of social work institutions.

4. Ethical Considerations

The research employed ethical considerations consistently in the conduct of the investigation on the leadership in social work as basis for their promotion of the heads of social work institutions in China. The conduct of the study was governed by fundamental ethical guidelines. Initially, explicit agreement was gathered from all participants before the conduct of the study. Extensive details on the research's goals, approaches, possible hazards, and advantages of the study

were discussed to guarantee that their involvement was voluntary and well-informed. They were also assured that they may withdraw from the study at any point without facing any negative consequences.

Confidentiality was strictly adhered and maintained to safeguard the privacy of all respondents. Specifically in the data collection, all the respondents' replies from surveys and records from interviews were anonymized and securely kept to ensure their identities protection. The presentation of research results only used de-identified, aggregated data.

The research placed great importance on ensuring the ethical treatment of disadvantaged populations. Particular attention was given to safeguarding the rights and welfare of those who may be more vulnerable to potential hazards, such as respondents from disadvantaged communities. Their involvement was managed with tact and careful consideration of their individual requirements.

The research completed an ethical review procedure as mandated by relevant institutions or ethics committees to guarantee compliance with ethical standards and safeguard the rights of participants. The research adhered to a strict policy of transparency and honesty, ensuring that participants and stakeholders were supplied with precise and reliable information on the study's aims, goals, and possible consequences.

The researcher took deliberate efforts to guarantee the safety and well-being of the individuals. The questionnaire and interview questions were thoughtful and empathetic towards the emotional state of the participants, while the researcher provided in-person guidance for their accessibility of assistance in case they encountered any kind of discomfort.

The research sought to enhance the knowledge and practices in dance sport education, benefiting both the participants and the wider field, via the dissemination of information and the development of educational policies. The study aimed to include a wide spectrum of people in order to gather different viewpoints. It was carried out with a strong dedication to fairness, ensuring that data collection, analysis, and reporting were free from bias.

Adequate safeguards was put in place to ensure the security and integrity of the obtained data. Secure data storage, limited data access, and suitable data anonymization or de-identification techniques are all part of this. Should research be published or presented, such publication must be consented by respondents of the study to protect the data collected from them.

The study's goal was to maximize benefits while minimizing possible damage to participants and the larger society. Researchers carefully assessed the study's possible effect on participants and took efforts to guarantee that the research added to knowledge and practice in a positive way. The study's results were disclosed honestly and openly, with no data modification or deception. Any possible conflicts of interest or prejudices were mentioned. Notwithstanding the principle of transparency when reporting the results, the anonymity of respondents remained intact.

In the completion of the data collection, the research findings were communicated in a responsible and accessible way, adding to the knowledge base, and educating relevant stakeholders. This guaranteed that the study's results were distributed in an ethical, factual, and non-misleading manner.

5. Presentation, Analysis, And Interpretation of Data

This chapter presents the outcomes derived from the survey questionnaires administered to the respondents and documents the relevant data collected from them regarding the study about Leadership in Social Work: Basis for Promotion of the Heads of Social Work Institutions in China.

1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of all respondents by gender, years in service, and educational background. A total of 193 heads of the social work institutions answered the survey, which was distributed via Google Forms. The following are the results of the data gathering as well as the discussion for each table.

Table 1. Respondents Profile According to Gender

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Male	52	26.93
Female	141	73.07
Total	193	100.0
Years in Service		
1-5 years	61	31.61
6-10 years	45	23.32
11-15 years	46	23.83
16-20 years	19	9.84
21-25 years	3	1.55
26-30 years	4	2.07
Over 30 years	15	7.77
Total	193	100.0
Educational Background		
Specialist	94	48.70
Undergraduate students	86	44.56
Master's degree students	10	5.18
Doctoral students	3	1.55
Total	193	100.0

Table 1 shows that in terms of gender, there were 141 out of 193 respondents were female with 73.07%, while 52 out of 193 were male with 26.93%. This finding implied that social work predominantly involves women. This finding supports that there is gender-awareness in social work practice. It recognizes the problems between women and men that are rooted in structural inequality and links their personal experiences with social position and status (Leung, 2011). Women dominate the basic grades of the social work profession globally. The 2019 China Social Work Longitudinal Study (CSWLS) reported that 4714 (79%) out of 6776 social workers in 56 Chinese cities were women (Chen & Dominelli, 2022).

In terms of years of service, the results revealed that majority of the respondents, 61 respondents or 31.61% equivalent were in the range of 1-5 years of service and 46 and 45 respondents or 23.83% and 23.32% respectively were in the range of 6-10 years and 11-15 years equivalent. This finding implies that employees who were within the 1-5 years of service range were often regarded as newcomers in the company. Conversely, those who have been with the institution for an extended period contribute to its stability, retain institutional knowledge, and ensure continuity. Their dedication and accumulated experience significantly boost overall performance.

The result was associated with the professional identity of social workers and its fluidity in China, where social work has a short history as a practical discipline, models for delivering social services vary across regions and academic awareness of foreign theories of social work coexists with strong commitment to finding solutions specific to China. Their identity and specialization as social workers emerged and evolved through meetings with clients and other social workers. The management of their institutions encouraged them to take the junior and intermediate social work exams,

which would formalize their competence. They were exposed to different, and partially conflicting, professional ideals and values through practical social work, social work textbooks, study trips to Hong Kong and professional guidance from local and Hong Kong supervisors (Niu & Haugen, 2019).

Relatively, the results of the educational background consisted majority of the respondents who were specialist or professional with 94 respondents or 48.70% equivalent. It was followed by undergraduate students with 86 respondents or 44.56% equivalent. This means that in social work, professionals frequently specialize in particular areas to meet the varied needs of individuals, families, and communities. This result was parallel to the report on the significant expansions of China to its social work labor forces and education programs in response to the growing social issues that accompanied the countries rapid economic development. Historically, Peking University started recruiting undergraduate social work students in 1989. By the end of 2019, over 500 undergraduate, master's and Ph.D. programs had been established which produced over 40,000 social graduates yearly (Xie et al., 2021).

Overall, the results revealed that most of the respondents were female with 1-5 years of service as a professional social worker with specialized educational background which made them competent and trustworthy in the field of social work.

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