

Factors Influencing Professional Identity among Social Work Students in China

Hongfang Li

Yulan liu

Department of Social work, School of Shiliang Law
Changzhou University, Changzhou, Jiangsu Province
China

Abstract

Based on the data from 445 samples of Chinese social work students in Jiangsu Province, our partial correlation analysis show the degree of social work students' professional identity in recent years is a middle level belonging, improved by the rapid development of social work. Not only the personal factors including students' grade, the level of their awareness on the profession of social work before higher education and current understanding, but also the scholastic factors including university category, students' evaluation of professional practice and materials enhance social work students' professional identity. Partial correlation analysis shows that the level of professional identity of female students is higher than the male. Different from previous study, the level of lower grade students' professional identity is stronger than upper grade students'. The municipal social work students' degree of professional identity is higher than the students' degree of institution belongs to the Ministry of Education, provincial top university and provincial general university. We conclude, based on this study, the policies that contribute to the cultivation of social work talents can enhance social work students' professional identity.

Keywords: Professional Identity; Personal factors; Scholastic factors; Social work students

1. Introduction

From 1987 to present, there is over 27 years' history of professional education of social work in China. The related research is mainly concentrated on the existing problems and counter measures of professional education of social work. These problems could be reduced to the following aspects. Firstly, the consciousness of profession is too weak and orientation of subject is vague. Secondly, there is lack of the qualified assets and teachers, not having the strong basic theoretical research and nonstandard curriculum arrangement. Moreover, training of professional practice is weak and teaching materials and references are insufficient. The solutions of these problems are to accelerate the process of professionalization of social work, gain the widely approval of society and support of government, carry out school system access and control strictly school conditions, tighten the construction of teachers' group and specialized theory and laboratory, and strengthen practical training (Wei Chen,2002;Zhenyue Ma and Shaobin Zhou,2006; Yajing Ma,2007; Guozhen Li, Naibin Xu, Zhenzhu Lei,2008;).By 2014,more than 310 universities have social work students(Jun Wen,2015).Some studies found that professional identity of social work students was not high and the mainly influencing factor was personal interest(Binian Shi,2006; Qingdan Chen,2005; Haibo Xie,2012;)

Since 2006, the authorities have introduced a slew of policies including "Evaluation on the professional level interim provisions of social workers", "Professional level exams implementation measures of Junior social worker and social worker" and "China publishes resolution on building of harmonious society", which promote the further development of social worker and accelerate its professionalization. What happens to the professional identity of social work students in such a situation? What are the influential factors?

With regard to professional identity of social work students, Qingdan Chen (2005) reported that the level of total professional identity of student is low, but the identity of professional value is high level and partially agree with the mode of professional teaching and students' professional outlet. Empirical studies further showed that the influencing factors of social work students' professional identity are comprehensive and polyphyletic (Qingdan Chen, 2005; Guozhen Li et al., 2008).

Qingdan Chen (2005) argued that the value and attitude of the public and government influence the students' opinions of professional identity. Guozhen Li and et al. (2008) demonstrated that personal interest is the mainly restrict factor of professional identity of student, which is personal, social, governmental and scholastic results of joint action.

This paper explores the overall situation of personal cognition of social work students, which is on account of the general conception based on the students' concept of professional identity. The level of satisfaction of learning social work, the evaluation of results of professional learning, the prospective intention of employment, the view of prospect of social work development, the willingness to apply a related job with social work, the willingness to take the qualification test of social work are six important dimensions used in this study can reasonably capture respondents' professional identity. To examine the professional identity of social work students, we measured the six part variables and the whole variable.

Moreover, we explored the personal and scholastic factors influencing the students' professional identity in the context of governmental and social factors with the development of social work. In sum, the variables measuring students' personal factor, went to gender, current grade, understanding of profession before attending university, current understanding of profession; the variables measuring scholastic factor went to type of university, characteristic of university, number of professional teacher, conditions of university laboratory, period of professional practice, evaluation of professional practice, evaluation of major courses, evaluation of course books.

Hypothesis1: The personal qualities of social work students influence their professional identity.

1a. It is not significant that gender of the social work students impacts on the professional identity. The professional identity between male and female is insignificant.

1b. the professional identities of upper grade students are lower than higher grade students.

1c. If social work students have more understanding of profession before they entering universities, their professional identity is higher than less understanding of profession.

1d. If social work students currently have more understanding of profession, their professional identity is higher than less understanding of profession.

Hypothesis 2: The characteristic of school which social work students study in influences their professional identity.

2a. The students in university belonging to Ministry of Education with better conditions have higher professional identity than other types of university.

2b. The level of professional identity of the students in comprehensive university with more complete supporting resources is higher than that of students in other types of university.

2c. The bigger number of professional teacher of university has greater impaction on students' professional identity, the higher level of professional identity of students.

2d. Establishing the professional laboratory of social work will increase the level of professional identity of students.

2e. If the period of professional practice is longer, then it will promote the students' level of understanding of the profession of social work and the level of professional identity.

2f. If the evaluation of professional practice is higher, then it will promote the students' level of professional identity.

2g. If the students give higher evaluation of major courses they have learned, they will have higher level of professional identity.

2h. If the students give higher evaluation of course books they have learned, they will have higher level of professional identity.

2. Method

This study took place from September to December in 2009 and was conducted by the Department of Social work, Changzhou University in China. There were nearly 20 universities have social work students in Jiangsu Province. Based on the distribution and regional differences of profession of social work, the survey selected the social work students from eight universities respectively located in Xuzhou city, Nanjing city and Changzhou city. A total of 500 questionnaires were returned of 445 valid copies, the effective rate of 89%.

As shown in Table 1, of the 445 participants who responded, male and female rates are 37.0% and 63.0%, the rate of gender reflects the gender imbalance of social work students. Most of individuals who responded are sophomore (35.4%) and freshman (28.9%).

The number of junior and senior students is relatively small because some universities established their profession of social work in the last two years. Respondents tend to study in Provincial top university (64.3%) and comprehensive university (50.9%).

Table 1: Distribution of Variables of Current Status

Variable	Number	%
Gender		
Male	164	37.0
Female	278	63.0
Location of University		
Changzhou city	57	12.8
Nanjing city	276	62.0
Xuzhou city	112	25.2
Current grade		
Freshman	128	28.9
Sophomore	157	35.4
Junior	84	19.2
Senior	73	16.5
Type of family's Location		
Big city	1	0.2
Middle city	144	32.8
Small city	143	32.6
Countryside	100	22.8
Otherwise	51	11.6
Type of university		
University belonging to Ministry of Education	36	8.5
Provincial top university	274	64.3
Provincial general university	54	12.7
Municipal university	62	14.5
Characteristic of university		
Comprehensive university	190	50.9
Liberal arts university	59	15.8
Engineering university	124	33.3

Questions were asked about the degree of professional identity social work students had, about how the professional identity was influenced by the personal and scholastic factors. Respondents were asked to rate: (1)level of satisfaction of learning social work (on a scale from 1[very unsatisfied] to 5[very satisfied]), (2)evaluation of results of professional learning (from 1 [unaffected] to 3[affected]), (3)view of prospect of social work development(from 1 [very unconfident] to 5[very confident]), (4) willingness to take the qualification test of social work(from 1[other] to 5[preparation for it after graduation]),(5)prospective intention of employment is classified from 1[non-professional type of social work] to 2[professional type of social work],employees of social welfare facilities, social workers in community, employees of NGO and others are identified as 1[non-professional type of social work],civil servants, company employees and the self-employed are identified as 2[professional type of social work],(6)willingness to apply a related job with social work is rated from 1([certainly not willing]to 3[certainly willing]),according to wages, according to prospect of job, according to suitable opportunity and other is identified as 2[according to circumstances].The above six segmentation variables are aggregated into total variable of professional identity, which range from 8-23 points.14 points or less is rated as low professional identity, “moderate” if between14-19 points did so, and “high” of between 20-23 points.

2.1 Personal factors of professional identity

We transform four independent variables to seek the impact of personal factors on students' professional identity. Number 0-1, respectively, represented gender of “female”, “male”. The grade of freshman, sophomore, junior and senior is also represented by 1-4, respectively. Understanding of profession before entering university was rated from 1[very poor] to 5[very good]. We use a scale from 1[very poor] to 5[very good] for rating current understanding of profession.

2.2 Scholastic factors of professional identity

Six independent variables are transformed to seek the influence of scholastic factors on students' professional identity. Type and characteristic of school is used by virtualization processing. Number 0-1, respectively, represents type of "university belonging to ministry of education", "other"; Number 0-1, respectively, also represents characteristic of "liberal arts university and engineering university", "comprehensive university". Conditions of professional laboratory are rated from 1 to 3. We use a scale from 1[very satisfied] to 5[very unsatisfied] for rating valuation of professional practice, evaluation of major courses, evaluation of course books.

3. Results

3.1 Professional identity status of social work students

On the whole professional identity of social work students are middle level (Table 2), accounting for 76.6%. Concerning the level of satisfaction of learning social work, more than half (54.3%) of those who respondents have high satisfaction with learning social work, only nearly one in five (19.2%) are more unsatisfied. For evaluation of results of professional learning, most of the students (87.0%) think studying social work has a positive impact on individuals, especially on the concepts of terms and professional skills upgrading. Only 5.7% students are affected by learning profession of social work. Respondents are very confident of the future development prospects (75.4%); the students' willingness to apply a related job with social work is not obvious, More than one half (52.7%) students are ready to join the test qualifications of social work.

Table 2: Professional identity Status of Social work students

Variable	Number	%
Level of satisfaction of learning social work		
Very satisfied	16	3.6
Satisfied	223	50.7
SOSO	116	26.4
Unsatisfied	72	16.3
Very unsatisfied	14	3.0
Evaluation of results of professional learning		
Acquisition of professional knowledge and ideas	133	30.2
Enhancement of own opinion of society	124	28.2
Reinforcement of skills of interpersonal communication	126	28.6
Casual	32	7.3
Unaffected	21	4.8
Other	4	0.9
Prospective intention of employment		
Institution of social welfare	23	5.3
Civil servant	186	42.8
Staff of corporation	108	24.8
Social worker in community	18	4.1
Staff of NGO	19	4.4
Self-employment	54	12.4
Other	27	6.2
View of prospect of social work development		
Very confident	45	10.2
Confident	289	65.2
SOSO	35	7.9
Unconfident	62	14.0
Very unconfident	12	2.7
Willingness to apply a related job with social work		
Certainly not willing	41	9.3
According to wages	62	14.1
According to prospect of job	153	34.7
According to suitable opportunity	166	37.6
Certainly willing	15	3.4
Other	4	0.9
Willingness to take the qualification test of social work		
Preparation for it after graduation	233	52.7
Don't know	97	21.9
Unprepared for it	67	15.2
Never heard of it	29	6.6
Other	16	3.6
Total variance of profession identity	Mean=17;Mode=19; SD=2.4	
Low level	58	14.1
Medium level	314	76.6
High level	38	9.3

3.2 Personal factors and professional identity of social work students

Table 3 shown that four independent variables, including gender, grade, the level of understanding of profession before entering university and current understanding of profession have a signification impact on the total variable of professional identity. The partial correlation coefficients between the four independent variable and total variable, respectively, are -0.141, -0.160, 0.170, and 0.125. That is to say, female students have higher level of professional identity than male students; the professional identity of low-grade students are lower than high-grade students; social work students have more understanding of profession before entering university, their professional identity is higher; social work students currently have more understanding of profession, their professional identity is higher.

Further partial correlation analysis of relations between the personal traits and professional identity, we firstly find that the female students give higher evaluation of results of professional learning and higher level of satisfaction of learning social work than male students(the partial correlation coefficients respectively are -0.096,-0.141). Secondly, upper grade students are more willing to engage in a related job with social work, more confident with the development of social work and more satisfied with learning social work than higher grade students(partial correlation coefficients respectively are -0.145,-0.177,-0.206). Thirdly, before entering university, the students who know more about the profession of social work are more willing to engage in a related job with social work, more confident with the development of social work and more satisfied with learning social work than those who know less(partial correlation coefficients respectively are 0.130,0.139,0.240).Lastly, the students who know more about the profession of social work currently agree more to have a positive impact on themselves by learning social work, have stronger willingness to take the qualification test of social work and more confidence in prospect of social work and higher satisfaction of learning social work than those who agree less(partial correlation coefficients respectively are 0.200,0.163,0.137,0.200).

Table 3: Matrix chart of personal factors influencing professional identity

	Evaluation of professional learning	Willingness to take the qualification test of social work	Prospective intention of employment	Willingness to apply a related job with social work	View of prospect of social work development	Level of satisfaction of learning social work	Total variance of professional identity
Gender (male=1)	-.096 .050(*)	-.052 .291	-.017 .730	-.028 .573	-.093 .056	-.141 .004(**)	-.141 .004(**)
Grade	.048 .324	.008 .874	-.023 .647	-.145 .003 (**)	-.177 .000(**)	-.206 .000(**)	-.160 .001(**)
Understanding of profession before entering university	.085 .081	-.049 .321	.056 .256	.130 .008(**)	.139 .004(**)	.240 .000(**)	.170 .000(**)
Current understanding of profession	.200 .000(**)	.163 .001(**)	-.016 .740	.001 0.981	.137 .005(**)	.200 .000(**)	.215 .000(**)

Notes: **p< 0.01 level; * p< 0.05 level (2-tailed)

3.3 Scholastic factors and professional identity of social work students

Table 4 showed that only three independent variables, including type of university, evaluation of professional practice, evaluation of course books have a signification impact on the total variable of professional identity. Through analysis of variance, there is a significant difference of professional identity between municipal university, university belonging to ministry of Education, provincial top university and provincial general university. Hypothesis 2a did not pass validation. The partial correlation coefficients between evaluation of professional practice and total variable, between evaluation of course books and total variable, respectively, are 0.229, 0.153. In other words, the social work students are more satisfied with the professional course books, the higher the professional practice evaluation, the higher the degree of professional identity. Further analysis shows that the students who give higher evaluation of the results of professional learning are more willing to engage in a related job with social work, have more confidence in prospect of social work and higher satisfaction of learning social work than those who give lower evaluation (partial correlation coefficients respectively are 0.197,0.218,0.153).

The students who give higher evaluation of major courses and course books are more satisfied with learning social work than those who give lower evaluation (partial correlation coefficients respectively are 0.177,0.305).

Table 4: Matrix chart of scholastic factors influencing professional identity

	Evaluation of professional learning	Willingness to take the qualification test of social work	Prospective intention of employment	Willingness to apply a related job with social work	View of prospect of social work development	Level of satisfaction of learning social work	Total variance of professional identity
Type of university (university belonging to Ministry of Education =1)	.007(**)	.004(**)	.029(*)	.830	.233	.051	.000(**)
Characteristic of university (Comprehensive university=1)	.833	.005(**)	.748	.813	.419	.210	.059
Number of professional teacher	-.036 .451	-.043 .363	.043 .374	-.045 .591	-.107 .416	-.111 .020	-.113 .737
Conditions of professional laboratory	.016 .845	.020 .685	-.028 .567	-.011 .814	.071 .143	.045 .354	.061 .218
Period of professional practice	.004 .333	-.033 .554	-.120 .120	-.102 .700	.108 .679	-.005 .168	-.009 .145
Evaluation of professional practice	.054 .520	-.013 .878	.090 .092	.218 .009(**)	.197 .018(*)	.153 .000(**)	.153 .000(**)
Evaluation of major courses	.023 .789	.032 .707	.008 .928	.043 .614	.010 .907	.177 .034(*)	.092 .277
Evaluation of course books	.034 .684	.098 .245	.039 .644	.041 .628	.148 .079	.305 .000(**)	.229 .006(**)

Notes: **p< 0.01 level; * p< 0.05 level (2-tailed)

4. Conclusions

The findings of this research only partly provide support for the influence of personal variables and scholastic variables. Except in the case of hypothesis 1c, hypothesis 1d, hypothesis 2f and hypothesis 2h, all of the null hypotheses are rejected.

5. Discussion

On the whole professional identity of social work students are middle level. Most of the students are satisfied with learning social work, and optimistic with the development of social work in the future. Only few of the students are unsatisfied with learning social work. On the contrary, ten years ago most students were unsatisfied with it (Danqing Chen, 2005). Since 2006 there is a push to allow a series of rules and regulations to be drawn up by central government for promoting the development of social work (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2006).

The personal factors found to be significantly associated with professional identity among social work students are gender, grade, the level of understanding of profession before entering university and current understanding of profession. Gender has significant influence on social work students' professional identity. Because of the gender stereotype of social work occupation (Lena Dominelli, 2004), female students think that they are more suitable to learn social work (Bing zhang, 2012). It is different from the results of some research (Danqing Chen, 2005; Zhengtao Niao, 2013). Grade, however, also has an independent effect on professional identity. The higher the grade of students, the lower the degree of professional identity they have. Apparently students do not have strong ambition to take the occupation of social work. It is not surprising that students have more understanding of profession; their professional identity is higher than less understanding of profession (Yancheng Lin, etc. 2013). Of the eight variables of scholastic factors affecting professional identity comprising professional practice, only evaluation of professional practice, type of university, and evaluation of course books have a significant effect on professional identity.

The evaluation of professional practice demonstrates the strongest significant level of all variance. Social work students gained the identification of the institution of practice and the clients (Zhengtao Niao, 2013), comprehension of the value and ethic of social work through their professional practice (Jia Cao, 2013). There are better conditions, including the funds, cultivation pattern in the University belonging to Ministry of Education (Zhengtao Niao, 2013).

The findings of this research do provide some policy implications for social work education. The most obvious implication is the importance of actual professional practice. This study suggests the possible value of high level of professional practice involving formal training and experiences.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the national social science foundation of China (13CSH100) and the Philosophy and Social Science fund from Education Department of Jiangsu Province (2014SJB72).

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