An Analysis of Emotional Exhaustion of Social Worker from the Perspective of Guanxi: A Case Study of China's X Agency

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Abstract The outflow of talents and emotional exhaustion of social workers has become an urgent issue in the field of social workers. The project System's operational process of a Chinese social work agency was analyzed by using the "process-event analysis" strategy. Causes and countermeasures of emotional exhaustion of staff in X agency were discussed and proposed from the perspective of Guanxi which mainly includes administrative and professional relationships in Chinese culture. The results showed that the bureaucratic administration and the involute professional relationships were the most important reasons for the emotional exhaustion issue. To alleviate the dilemma, the reciprocal public service pattern and professional group of government-social work agencies and communities should be established effectively. Strengthening professional values and occupational ethics in the social work institution could be a key solution to the emotional exhaustion issue.

Keywords Social Worker, Emotional Exhaustion, Project System, Professional Relationship, Administrative Relation

Introduction

The rebuilt of Social work effort in mainland China has been lasting for nearly 30 years since the “Ma Dian” meeting in 1987, which is considered as the beginning of modern social work education in China. When the strategic deployment program of constructing a large contingent of social work talents was put forward in 2006 by the Communist Party of China in the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee, China's social work ushered in an excellent career development opportunity. In 2010, the Central Committee issued a national plan for the development of medium and long-term talents from 2010 to 2020, which points out that 2 million social work professionals will be trained by 2015 and 3 million social work professionals should be trained by 2020. By the end of 2015, China had a total of 1.765 million social service institutions and facilities, with a total of 13.89 million workers, of whom 206000 were certified social workers (Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2015). However, with the rapid development of professional work in China's social work, the shortage of social work professionals is becoming increasingly serious. Statistics show that Chinese universities train for about 8000 social work professionals each year, but less than 30% of them engage in social work after graduation (Liu & He, 2012). At present, Guangdong, the most developed province in social work, accounts for only 1% of the social workers that have worked for more than 5 years, 92.8% of social workers are less than 3 years, and about 1/4 of the total number of social workers quit this career each year (Shu, 2014). The shortage and loss of social work talent had become an important problem affecting the professional development of social work in mainland China. Most of the studies explained this issue in terms of low salary, self-value is sometimes difficult to achieve, lack of incentive system, the personal career development is limited. However, the loss of social workers was also found in well-developing agencies with high pay and generous space of promotion. Besides, the authors believe that the emotional exhaustion of professional social workers is an important cause.

In his study of burnout, Maslach put forward the concept of emotional exhaustion. He believed that occupation burnout happens to people that worked in continuous tension and need to interact with others for a long time. These people have a feeling of emotional exhaustion and negative attitude on customers or frustration of their job.
relationships (Maslach et al. 1996). In recent years, often occurs to people that work in interpersonal depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment. It defined burnout as an emotional exhaustion, effectively alleviate the pressure on working. Therefore, he without a sense of accomplishment because they cannot contribute to stress and burnout include the nature of social work practice, especially tension between philosophy and work demands and the organization of the working environment (Lloyd C et al. 2009). Sulak and Smith (2003) found that social work is in the first 40 occupations in which the prevalence and attrition rate are higher than the average level in the United States. Social workers are high-risk groups who are prone to job stress and job burnout. A recent instrument validation study illustrated that caregiver role identity is related to increased personal distress (e.g. depression, burnout), and this distress can have the negative influence on practitioners' professional work (Siebert, D. C & Siebert, C. F, 2007). Those who are especially engaged in emotional labor in the industry are the high incidence of emotional exhaustion, such as paramedics, social workers and service personnel. Job burnout is the strongest predictors of turnover or intention to leave. The results are compatible with the hypothesis that idealism and career orientation affected students' emotional exhaustion (Barak M E M et al. 2001). Nonetheless, the results are not compatible with the hypothesized negative relationship between altruism and emotional exhaustion (Ngai & Cheung, 2009). To prevent and solve the emotional exhaustion of social workers, Lloyd C argued that the focus of future research should be on identifying characteristics of mental health that contribute to emotional exhaustion (Lloyd C & King R, 2004).

Similar to foreign experience, the research on emotional exhaustion in Chinese social work is dramatically increasing. Zhang (2011) found that pay out of emotion and energy is not recognized and the feeling of fatigue and frustration of an inability to change the current situation is the main factors of social workers’ emotional exhaustion. An empirical research shows that more than 80% social workers in the survey have suffered emotional exhaustion and other related issues, front-line social workers are in the most serious situation (Ren, 2017). Liu (2015) suggested that social workers' emotional exhaustion includes trapping in copy writing and miscellaneous administrative work, and extra work caused by lack of staffs. In addition, the entire working environment system has insufficient work support, and the lack of emotional support is also an important cause of social workers’ emotional exhaustion. Another additional factor of the problem, Gu (2007) stated that the current media reports made the social work "universal good" impression which not only increased the moral burden of social workers, but reduced the professionalism of social work also. High pressure, low identification and minimal sense of accomplishment are the major causes of job burnout among social workers (Yan, 2012). To solve this problem, effective internal communication has a positive effect to reduce the social worker's occupation burnout, which can be accomplished through social work salon and effective supervision system (Fei, 2007). What's more, social work institutions should pay more attention to the emotional exhaustion issue. More administrative support, good communication and effective employee motivation system are some key factors that cannot be belittled. From the social worker themselves, it is also important to enhance the ability of self-reflection and adjustment to cope with job burnout (Lan, 2013).

From both experience and academic perspectives, it is undoubtedly important to understand the current situation of exhaustion of the social workers. However, it is important to pay attention to more analysis with regard to this issue. Firstly, quantitative research has been widely used in the listed studies which are quite rational in explaining the connection between cause and result, but quantitative research ignores the dynamic effect on psychological state of social workers giving the daily practice of social work agencies and "project" operating system in China. Secondly, from the research perspective, almost all studies had focused on the social structure analysis paradigm of "macro (government) - medium (Institutions) - micro (social worker)", the impact on Guanxi on social work practices which has a very complex connotation in China that describes the basic dynamic in personalized networks of influence and is a central idea about Chinese society. Therefore, in a professional social work agency, our research analyzed the daily social work operation process or work schedule by taking the process-event analysis strategy, manifestations and causes of emotional exhaustion were examined from the perspective of Chinese Guanxi. It will be helpful to put forward some feasible measures and suggestions to address the problem of emotional exhaustion among social workers.

Case and Background

Case

The X social organization was founded in 2010 situated in China’s H City. It’s a private, professional social service agency. X agency is one of the earliest professional service agencies to win government purchase of social services project in H city. The organization, which has 17 employees at present, has received many awards from municipal and provincial government. X social service
agency’s major work are community service, mainly helping the elderly, young people, women and disabled in the community, so as to meet the needs of community residents. The agency is professional service oriented and tries to serve community residents, help residents solve various difficulties in community life through the integration of community public service resources. The average salary of X central social workers is about 4000 yuan RMB, which is at a moderate level in the region. This wage is very attractive to the newly graduated undergraduates in consideration of local income level.

Methods

The authors use the "Process-Event Analysis" strategy, which is based on the day-to-day operational experience of X agency, to propose a research path for the analysis of the daily operation process. This path is concentrated on specific practice in project services. In specific, the administrative and professional relationships in the project operation process are mainly aimed at achieving a new understanding of social workers emotional exhaustion. One of the authors has acted as a social work supervisor in X agency from July 2015 to February 2017. This experience gave the author an opportunity to interview those recruited in and out of the agency and relevant people, including professional social workers (graduated from college in less than 2 years), government officials, and neighborhood full-time staff. Through the observation of their own and others' words and behaviors, the author could describe and analyze the real situation of professional social worker’s emotional exhaustion.

Operation of the X Agency: The Practical Logic of "Project"

In the 1980s, the "factory management system" in urban Chinese communities gradually gave way to disintegration, and the new concept of community management system based on "community construction" has become the focus of administrative management regime. As the most important part of the state's social management and social service, the government is to provide common services to fulfill the common need of the majority of the residents. However, the community service has resulted in inefficient or ineffective supplying to services in meeting the diversified needs of individual residents. In the early 21st century, development of social work has been recognized as a part of the national policy. Professional social work and professional social work institutions have become one of its community services through services supported by government (Zhu & Chen, 2013).

In 2014, H city carried out the pilot program of community service projects under the leadership of local level government. The city government set up an annual budget of 3 million yuan RMB grants for supporting home care services. The government made use of the funds to support home care services from professional social work organizations. Since the X agency was the earliest social worker institutions in H city, it was selected by the government for the provision of these services. The principal focus of the work is to provide home-based care services for the elderly, the poor, and widows in four communities. Services include: firstly information collection for the service object; secondly, psychological counseling and casework; thirdly, integrate various service resources and cooperate with community social workers. For X agency with little funding, this project not only helped it get out of the situation of doing little work, but also helped the agency cover a lot of operating costs. The agency has allocated 4 social workers and a supervisor for each community, with ambitious preparations for a massive intervention.

For the government, the purpose of supporting the X agency is to improve the quality and living standards of the elderly people in H city. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the service provided by the X agency. The city government has promulgated relevant service standards, and carried out performance appraisal for the home care service provided by the organization. Specific measures are: firstly, home visits, telephone interviews and other forms of evaluation from the object of service; secondly, onsite assessment of the service organization’s infrastructure facilities, personnel, and specialized technology and service quality. The most important thing is that the government has set up a reward and evaluation mechanism, and the institutions that meet the government's assessment requirements only will be eligible to get the full amount of the project fee. Agencies which don’t qualify the criteria will not be receiving the project funds.

Through the above background, we can observe the design and structure of the community service projects. First of all, the project of social service offers government departments a centralized management of funds, the allocation of resources has evolved into project centered mode. This situation has forced X agency to meet relevant government standards. Secondly, professional social work has obtained the legitimacy of entering the community work through the bidding process, and has assumed the community service responsibility which is originally expected to be the function of local government. Finally, the project is interacting with the community with top-down logic, professional social worker and the community become the key stakeholders for the first time, and whether these key stakeholders agree to be partners in achieving the
project objectives depends largely on the Guanxi between the two sides. This implies that social workers must spend a lot of time and energy to ensure Guanxi work effectively.

**Pain Point of Emotional Exhaustion—Guanxi**

The Guanxi is deemed as the most significant analytic subject in the study of sociology, and is the core concept operating in Chinese society (Zhai, 2011). For the Chinese social work with community embedded development model, the social work makes up a significant part of the social construction advocated by the government. Although the professionalization is perceived as the basis and advantage of the embedded development of social work, the ability to cooperate with government officials and community committee members and the service objects actually determines the outcomes and effectiveness of the professional social work. Thus, problems of the Guanxi faced by the social worker are extremely complicated, which include the professional relationship in the course of work and the relevant social administration relation. According to the research carried out by the author, since X institution joined the project of community service in 2013, the institution has experienced serious staff turnover. In 2016, when the project was completed, a total of 17 employees have left the office successively, and most of them stayed for less than a year.

Such phenomenon is derided by the agency director as a Chinese proverb “fixed barracks, floating soldiers”. He believes that, the payment for the employee is high, because a front-line social worker can be appointed to 60 thousand yuan RMB per year based on the basic salary and performance, which are above the average wage in the local context. Additionally, the weekend is provided, and still the workers are not highly engaged in the work. All these people leave the organization because they think the work is boring. He attributes the emotional exhaustion of social worker in the agency to the improper management of Guanxi in every aspect. For this reason, this study starts the research with the course and event operation logic in project’s operation of the social worker agency, and illuminates how the problems of Guanxi result in the emotional exhaustion of social worker from the perspective of administrative relation and professional relationship.

**Case Analysis**

**Bureaucratic Administrative Relation**

Currently, the operation mode of Chinese social work institutions is through government funding. The government is perceived as the customer to purchase the service, and the social work institution provides satisfactory service for the government and the community. However, with resources highly monopolized by the government, the obligation boundary between the government and the social work institution is ambiguous. The relationship between the government and the social work institution turns out to be quite unequal. The government dominates the relationship while the agency has not enough space to voice their concerns, and the profession of the work is weakened. Under such unequal relationship, the social work institution is no longer the partner of government, but the dependent of the government. In this case, the director of X agency believes that the primary professional value of social work practice is to satisfy the government. If the agency does not have a good reputation, the government will stop supporting the service from social service agencies, and therefore there won’t be any social work institution. For this reason, the administrative relation to the activity of social work profession greatly impacts the professional operation of the institution.

X agency offers the service contracted by the government. It not only has the right to use the facilities for the public service in the community, but enjoys the right to keep the information for itself. However, in practical operation, the management offside of government is obvious. A community committee member is assigned to work with the social worker with his responsibilities of monitoring the activity of agency and its personnel and collecting the activity information about the service. With the exception of fitness center, the utilization of other rooms shall be applied to the sub-district office every time for approval. If the sub-district office needs to use the room for organizing some meeting, the social work activity is put off. As a result, the misunderstanding and dissatisfaction with residents arose. However, the responsibility for practical service quality is merely assumed by the X agency. For the agency, information such as members’ data and service scheme is deemed as the core documents of the institution. However, such data is required to be handed over to the staff engaged with the institution to be submitted to the sub-district office, landing the institution in the dangerous position of revealing the resident’s privacy and the confidential documents of the agency. In the case of personnel, the government assigns some full-time staff of community residents committee and some party members facing difficulties of living to work in X agency so as to supervise the management of the project. Hence, administrative social work is reversely embedded into the professional social work service. The agency consequently cannot resist the interference from the government in matters related to the project staff institution’s personnel.

The social work institution is non-governmental

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2 Guanxi describes the basic dynamic in personalized networks of influence and is a central idea about Chinese society. In Western media, the pinyin Romanization of this Chinese word is becoming more widely used instead of the two common translations of it—“connections” and “relationships”—as neither of those terms sufficiently reflects the wide cultural implications that Guanxi describes.
organization and their work content is independent. However, in practice, the institution is sometimes assigned to work by government staff. The sub-district office has established the system of three-party joint conference on social work institutions and the district government. The social worker is required to participate in the meeting, report daily work and work schedule. Additionally, the work of social worker is frequently inspected by the sub-district officials and three-party system. For the service items of the sub-district office carried out by the institution, the institution is required to submit a weekly report to the sub-district office, and to compile a monthly report at the end of the month. Not only the active scheme and implementation contented is required to be provided by X agency, but the figure illustration, edition and publication are the responsibility of the X agency. If a certain leader is invited to launch an activity, the lecture script is required to be provided by X agency. If the sub-district office is compiling the report related to the service for the aged, it shall also be done by X agency. “There are numerous meetings to take part, endless discussions to be carried out, and endless reporting to be submitted. The relationship between the sub-district office and X agency is extremely terrible. The sub-district office did not like us, and interfered in every aspect of our work”, says a former social worker in X agency when he recalled these horrible days.

Besides, some social workers are vulnerable as the government intervenes in the professional service. For example, there was a leader of the civil affairs bureau for a routine inspection that the X agency’s office and a field area can be changed into early teaching center when he realized the space resource of the community activity room could be allotted for some other uses. Consequently, the activity rooms which were originally used by the aged to rehearse the square dance are changed into a preschool education center. Because other activity rooms are too small and no mirror on the wall, the planned activity to make a good square dance had to be cancelled. Members who have registered for the activity also required to be respectively informed at the last moment. Such administrative work style completely ignored the resident’s feeling and the institution’s operation, which have serious adverse implications for the regular service and effectiveness of the project.

In this process, the bureaucratic administrative relationship between purchaser and social work agency gradually became hierarchical and centralized power relationship. The emotional relation of the social workers was weakened, and the entire agency is more like a tool to fulfill some specific tasks and targets. All the things irrelevant to the targets won’t be discussed, and everyone is required to take on their duties in specific position in the organization. Because it is not adapted to this bureaucratized administrative relationship, many of the employees in the agency were disappointed and chose to quit their job.

Involvement of Professional Relationship

The professional relationship in the social work refers to the dynamic interactive relationship existing on the attitude and inner feeling between the worker and client in the servicing course of social work (Harlow E, 2013). It is aimed at helping appropriate adaption between the client and their personal environment. In terms of western language environment, the professional relationship is required to be adequate, which means the social worker is required to remain objective so as to better analyze, judge and formulate the work plan and help the client. Furthermore, the worker is required to devote himself to the relationship established with the client. The worker shall take on the responsibility, and have the adequate emotional investment and expression to warm and support their client. However, in the cultural context of China, both the social workers and their clients are engaged in this professional relationship with high emotional involvement. The director of X social service agency has introduced the author an example of throwing good money after bad.

In Jun 2014, the X agency cooperated with the hospital to carry out a lecture on health. A total of 30 residents participating in the lecture could all get a bag of washing powder. The residents were unwilling to join the lecture at first, but changed their idea because of this reward. However, many of them were awarded nothing due to the limited availability of washing powder. They showed their dissatisfaction directly in the lecture immediately, and flung out hard words with the social workers. They listened to nothing of the explanation, and demanded that this was their territory so whether they registered or not for the lecture they deserve everything offered. Two of the residents wantonly abused the workers for over half an hour as a reason that the social worker has not the right to prevent their participation in the activity center. Additionally, some residents reported and complained about the superiors for punishing the social worker as a warning. Within a day, the criticism against the social worker spread all over the community. The implementation of the social work activity plunged into crisis. Seriously, two young female social workers were stuck in the

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3 The involution was pointed out by Huang Zongzhi while he was searching the agriculture in north China and Yangtze River delta area of China that, the intensification and the shrunk marginal return of agriculture are jointly perceived as the descending marginal yield of labor. In accordance with the existing definition of involution, the internal regularity of the involution can be summarized as that, the "growth without development" was emphasized, and the process of the operation failed to achieve the forward breakthrough. In the on the generation mechanism, occurrence and things run "trapped" outside the home and facing the situation, the external factors do not provide a way to smooth development of things, and the internal factors to achieve self-change to overcome the difficult situation, which can lead to things into more self-stuck even self-denial.
emotional panic. Within two weeks, they avoided the direct meeting with the residents due to the unpleasant experiences they had.

The above mentioned cases show that when the residents consider their rights were distained, it led to their discontent and radical behavior, and then derived a lot of contradictions. Accordingly, numerous serious contradictory issues are triggered. In these cases, such violent conflict has virtually formed the professional risk for the social workers, which is not only related to whether the social worker can be maintained, but more importantly such harsh language and abuse to disturb the psychological health of the social workers. Such emotional environment is not conducive to the project staff. After this event, some social workers shared many negative events encountered with daily work. For instance, while using the bathroom of community resident committee, workers were urged or drove by the residents through smashing the door, landing the worker in the long-term panic and the psychological shadow. To avoid such harassment, social workers go to the bathroom in the store around. Another example is that, when carrying out propaganda and the personnel recruitment of professional service activity, a female social worker encountered verbal attack of an old resident. The worker tried to talk to him and asked reason for his dissatisfaction. However, another round of abuse was the reply. When the social worker pointed out such behavior and impolite language, there was no effect. There was no apology or explanation in the resident for his abusive language.

After learning the experience and lessons of such unsuccessful activities, the director of the X agency placated these two female social workers, and encouraged them to start over and to face the residents of the community with sincerity and compromise. As for the gift, the director decided that all residents participating in the activity shall have the opportunity to get one. There is no limitation of number to be awarded. After 2 weeks is that, these two female workers started over their work and carried out the activity in the community again. Nevertheless, new difficulties started coming one after another. It is found that residents were not active in the daily activity. They have no interest in participating in the conventionally outdoor activities. Once gifts are to be given in the activities, or practical material can be rewarded, residents show disinterest in participating. Commonly, they scramble for the gifts, and the available number of the gifts is always less than the requirement. Although the participants are obviously more than expected in the activity having gifts, it is obvious that the residents pay more attention to the gifts rather than the activity itself. While the core part is carried out, they are mostly chatting with others or playing with cell phones. Very few people are actually involved in the activity, and the activity has no value for some of the members of the community. However, social workers have to still implement the activity irrespective of what the participants think of the activity.

In the context of such situations explained above, the social worker has to involve characteristic in managing the professional relationship with the community residents. It is manifested as the problems and constantly generated conflict in the professional service course. The conflict becomes the major interaction between the two sides when dissatisfaction accumulates to a high level. The professional relationship is trapped without being developed and conflict throughout the entire operation. Obviously the worker is unsuccessful in establishing the relationship to the residents which are a core concept in Chinese Guanxi. The service objects deem the service provided by social worker as their privilege. They do not acquire a better understanding of the role and status of the social worker. Such relationship is defective. In the meantime, such events can easily result in the psychological trauma of the social worker. The initiative of social workers gets greatly weakened, the sense of achievement is reduced; thus the physical health of the social worker is influenced due to the psychological pressure. Eventually, 6 social workers resigned at the end of the year.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Now we can see the problem of losing of personnel with well developing agencies through the mentioned case analysis. Although the projected operation brings capital and service opportunity in the institution, due to the inequality between the government and institution, ambiguous cooperation boundary between the two parties, the bureaucratized administrative relationship eventually dominates the institution. The work of social worker is ossified under the pressure in office reporting and other activities of organization. Eventually, the emotional exhaustion of the worker is triggered due to the feeling of being exhausted. From the professional service perspective, the community residents have the biased understanding and poor acceptability of the social work project, which are manifested in their indifference to the professional service and the pursuit of the additional benefits of the course. To some extent, the degree of recognition of professional effort of the social workers is inadequate. The professional relationship is landed in the negative situation of involution. Facing the responsibility and questions about the community’s residents, the social worker eventually leaves the office after the mental and physical exhaustion.

How to prevent the social work from getting trapped in such awkward position of emotional exhaustion? The author believes that, every problem existing on the projected social work service has a cause. To breakthrough
every obstacle, specific analysis shall be performed. Sometimes, seemingly dominance by the objective factors is just the superficial phenomenon. The rational application and innovation of the professional methods and skills are the major driving force. First of all, the social work institution shall work with academic research department, the third-party institution and other relevant social organization to make professional union. The inequality between the government and the social organization shall be proactively optimized. The business associates relation between the institution and the governmental department should be changed into a relationship of cooperation and partnership. The agency should stand on community residents’ requirements, professional supply ability shall be enhanced, the cooperation boundary between the government and the institution should be clear and definite, the government should be assisted to fulfill the function reform, more social service is offered, and the situation that the social work institution is dominated by the governmental department, and the bureaucratization of social work needs to be fundamentally changed.

Secondly, in the process of project operation, the institution should actively build the pattern of government, social work institutions, community mutual participation in the common service and seek the interests of all sides. The institution shall combine its own action logic in the implementation of the project, and establish the rules of action. Implement a layered response strategy from different perspectives such as amendment to government action. Implement a layered response strategy from different perspectives such as amendment to government action. Implement a layered response strategy from different perspectives such as amendment to government action.

At last, the social work professional value and the ethic idea construction shall be reinforced. Managers should have high professional sensitivity and observing ability to acquire employee emotions and emotional crisis information in time, and promptly arrange follow-up cares by the supervisor to help employees get effective external support. The development of various forms of team building activities to enhance the cohesion and sense of belonging to the members and create a supportive and positive work atmosphere is also needed. Furthermore, it is better for social work agency to establish emotional comprehensive evaluation system for employees. Regularly checking and screening for emotional exhaustion of social workers is important. It should be a work of the institution to encourage the staff to help himself when emotional exhaustion appears and to help employees to build positive emotions of their work enthusiasm and self-confidence.

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