

Narrative Inquiry on the Professional Development of Social Workers

Jia Wang

China West Normal University, Nanchong, China

Abstract

There is a close interactive relationship between the professional growth and development of social workers. This study adopts a narrative research approach to explore the professional development paths and the empowerment mechanisms of social workers from their life experiences. The research findings reveal that the professional development paths of social workers exhibit diversified characteristics, mainly covering dimensions such as pre-service education (including university professional course learning), on-the-job training, professional supervision, practice reflection, and continuing education. The driving forces for their professional development are manifested as dual internal and external motivations: internal motivations include the need for self-actualization, professional interest, and professional identity; external motivations mainly stem from career development and social pressure. Based on the research findings, this study proposes constructive suggestions for the professional development of social workers from the dimensions of system improvement, ability enhancement, and career development.

Keywords

Social workers, Professional development, Narrative inquiry.

1. Question Raising

Social work has developed rapidly in recent years. From the government to the academic circle, efforts have never ceased to promote the professionalization and vocationalization of social work. However, in the process of practice, the development of social work as a profession has always been fraught with difficulties. In fact, human factors such as low professionalization, poor job stability, and lack of professional self-esteem have restricted the potential of social workers, which has affected the development of social work: "due to its relatively weak work autonomy, it is often restricted by leaders or systems in the working process, which affects the professional development of service work." [1]. Under the influence of low welfare benefits, lack of social recognition of professional positions, and the absence of corresponding promotion mechanisms and welfare guarantee systems in the industry, Li, Shen found that "the uniqueness of the work pressure faced by social workers makes them a vulnerable group to job burnout. In cities where social work is well developed in China, the situation of aggravated job burnout among social workers has been discovered." [2]. The depersonalization of social work and the low sense of personal achievement will have a certain impact on the job burnout of social workers." [3] Under such circumstances, many social workers choose to leave their positions. However, some social workers, despite experiencing emotional and professional "exhaustion", choose to remain in the social work industry and stay at their posts. This study aims to explore the life stories and growth processes of social workers, including important others in their lives, key events, experiences, and feelings, in order to understand from their life experiences:

(1) What factors influence social workers' entry into the social work profession?

(2) What are the paths and sources of motivation for the professional development of social workers?

(3) What feasible suggestions can be made for the professional development of social workers? Through the sharing of the life stories of the research participants, researchers and other readers can obtain the context of their lives, discover and create meaning, confirm their unique life values, and thereby understand and share the common experience elements, motivations, and differences among social workers. This may provide inspiration, guidance, and change for the professional development of social work and personal life. It can also offer some experiences and thoughts for graduating students who are considering social work and new social workers.

2. Research Process

2.1. Research Participants

The research participants of this article were mainly recommended based on the research content and theme of this article. They have diverse educational backgrounds, both from specialized and non-specialized fields, and have been in the social work industry for over 20 years. They have rich stories and are willing to share. The basic information of the five research participants is as follows:

Table 1. Information of Research Subjects

Research Subject	Gender	Social Work Experience (Years)	Position	Service Area	Organization Type
A	Female	26	Frontline Social Worker	Youth	Semi-official Large-scale
B	Male	26	Social Work Station Manager	Drug Control	Semi-official Large-scale
C	Female	24	Project Manager	Youth, Elderly	Official Small-scale
D	Female	24	Supervisor	Civil Governance	Comprehensive Grassroots Large-scale
E	Male	28	Organization Manager	Youth	Grassroots Small-scale

2.2. Research Methods

This study mainly adopts the narrative research method to understand the reasons why social workers choose the social work industry, as well as their professional development paths and motivations. It uses a narrative inquiry research design and conducts in-depth interviews to explore the rich clues of the life stories of the participants. Narrative research is a face-to-face conversation behavior, a process in which the interviewee and the interviewer jointly construct meaning. The interviewee does not merely reproduce memories but constructs his or her experiences and history by telling stories. Narrative inquiry does not disclose the "actual past" but constructs the "experiential truth"[4]. Therefore, this study hopes to understand the meaning of the participants' choice of the social work profession and their interpretation of

their cognition, emotional feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards social work through their own perspectives.

The research participants narrate their life stories from several aspects such as life chapters, key events, and significant others. Life chapters are the division of life stories into sections that the participants and the researcher discuss together, mainly following the participants' wishes. By writing memoirs, life is divided into different chapters and each chapter is named, allowing the researcher and the participants to understand the development traces of the social workers' life stories. Key events are necessary factors that string together a complete story, and each stage is composed of the occurrence of key events. In life, the most precious thing is to encounter a mentor. Perhaps it is a word of advice or the influence of their teachings that can affect one's entire life.

3. Research Findings

3.1. Professional Development Paths of Social Workers

Based on the stories narrated by the research participants, the following five professional development paths of social workers are summarized:

3.1.1 When first entering social work, institutions require the acquisition of relevant social work qualifications, and there are also corresponding level examinations for social work knowledge within the organization. During the certification process, one reviews previously learned but forgotten knowledge. In practical work, one can combine theory with practice and gain a new understanding and knowledge of social work theories. B social worker, who is not from a social work background, attended tutorial classes to study for the certificate. If one is interested in social work knowledge, one will continue to learn.

3.1.2 The participants in this study are all relatively early social workers. The training content for social work mainly relied on the on-the-job training provided by university teachers to the institution's staff. A social worker also participated in a practical training group organized by a university teacher before, which supplemented a lot of theoretical knowledge and provided many guiding suggestions for practical work.

3.1.3 After experiencing different fields of practice, it is found that the needs of each service recipient are different, which stimulates social workers to learn by doing. For example, in youth social work, one not only needs to know about youth social work but also about the physiology and psychology of youth. This is to enhance professional skills and respond to the specific needs of service recipients. For instance, C social worker attended training courses related to AIDS and homosexuality to do a good job in youth health-related projects.

3.1.4 Supervisors are indispensable guides for social workers when they first enter the field. Their rich practical experience provides guidance to social workers and support in terms of skills and emotions. C social worker had the support of a supervisor in the early days of the institution, but now without such support, he feels particularly directionless. D social worker learned many practical skills and value ethics from the supervisor.

3.1.5 Autonomous learning. All five social workers mentioned autonomy. A social worker said, "The biggest problem for people is not working hard." B social worker said, "It's like being a social worker. A master can lead you in, but the rest depends on yourself." You need to have the desire and initiative to learn. If you don't, I think you won't be able to do a good job as a social worker." Social worker C said, "Do it because you are interested and it's fun." Social worker D said, "To enrich yourself and your life experience." Social worker E made use of effective time to search for information about social work in Hong Kong online and proactively learn from the frontiers.

3.2. Sources of Motivation for Professional Development of Social Workers

From the analysis of the professional development paths of the five social workers mentioned above, the main sources of motivation for the professional development of social workers are as follows:

3.2.1 To enhance one's professional competence and avoid being eliminated by the profession. Social worker D stated that the main motivation for attending training and seminars is to acquire knowledge in these areas and enrich oneself. Social worker A claims to be a bookworm and always consults books whenever there is a problem, as if reading could provide a solution. "If you stay in the same place, don't come into contact with new things, and don't accept current ideas and concepts, you will be eliminated by society."

3.2.2 The affirmation from service recipients and the ability to better respond to their needs. Each service recipient that social workers face is unique, and their needs are different. Learning can better serve the service recipients. Social worker D also said, "During the long-term contact with service recipients, if they affirm the social worker, this is also a motivation for me to continue working as a social worker." Social worker B also said, "Without service recipients, I am nothing."

3.3.3 Starting from the joy. For social worker C, choosing social work is based on personal interest, and choosing to serve in this field is because of the interest in doing so.

3.2.4 The influence of external pressure. For the five participants in this study, they all face different pressures, such as work environment, service recipients, and self-satisfaction. They all rise to the challenges and do not give up. The reason they persist is their commitment to social work, their commitment to providing services to service recipients, and their commitment to enhancing professional growth through different means.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

4.1. Conclusion

4.1.1. Diverse reasons for choosing social work

This study explored the factors influencing social workers' entry into the social work industry. From the perspective of internal and external factors, internal factors mainly include: personality, ability, interest, values, etc.; external factors include: key events and the influence of important people.

Key events. Key events include major life experiences, experiences, and feelings. The occurrence of key events shapes the personality of the participants and influences their interests and values.

Important people. Important people mainly include: relatives and friends, teachers, leaders, supervisors, etc. The influence of important people is complex, including encouraging words, the influence of words and deeds, and subtle influence. They all have an impact on the formation of the participants' personalities, values, and the enhancement of their interests and hobbies. The affirmation from service recipients, feeling that this job is plain but valuable, and the guidance and supervision from leaders are all reasons and motivations for them to persist.

4.1.2. Diversified professional development paths

The participants in this study have diversified ways to enhance their professional development capabilities. The five social workers face different social situations, service recipients, and institutional cultures, and receive different trainings and exchanges, which leads to diverse and different needs for professional development paths.

University education. Most of the participants in this study first came into contact with social work during their university years through the study of the social work major. In China, social

work education leads the way, with social work students first learning theories and then engaging in practice. University education provides an initial understanding of social work, cultivates students' interest in the social work major, and enables them to learn theoretical knowledge, values, and practical skills, preparing them for practical work. During the university years, it is also a crucial period for shaping the participants' abilities. Participating in activities and using social work methods to strive for benefits enhance their organizational abilities and resource coordination abilities.

Diverse and rich training systems. The training content mainly includes: general practical abilities, social work ethics, knowledge of service recipient systems, and general professional skills. Social workers' participation in various trainings, skill enhancement, communication with peers, sharing experiences, and mutual learning have become multiple pathways for professional development.

Supervision guidance. In the process of conducting social work, supervisors are indispensable guides for social workers who are just starting out. Their rich practical experience provides guidance to social workers and offers support in terms of skills and emotions.

Self-directed learning. All five social workers mentioned the importance of autonomy. Without the desire to learn and the action of self-directed learning, all other pathways would be in vain. qiongqiongHu also pointed out that professional social workers should carry out service activities within the scope of their professional ability. In order to ensure the quality of service and reflect the professional level of social workers, they must continue to improve their comprehensive ability [5].

Continuing education. Continuing education mainly refers to the review and supplementation of theoretical knowledge after practical work experience. It is manifested in the improvement of academic qualifications, such as pursuing a bachelor's or master's degree while working; it also includes social work qualification level examinations. Necessary continuing education and the acquisition of new knowledge are also one of the pathways for professional development in social work.

4.1.3. Motivation comes from internal needs and external pressure

On the path of social work, the five research participants have experienced many surprises, doubts, shocks, and emotions that drive them to persevere in social work. In terms of external pressure, the demands of social work require them to meet the needs of service recipients, which stimulates them to improve their professional standards and learn relevant professional skills, thereby enriching the connotation of their professional development. Overcoming work pressure and environmental constraints also stirs up their thirst for the profession. Work setbacks and the recurrence of service recipients' problems encourage them to reflect on themselves, which becomes the best source of learning motivation. Professional and conscientious social workers must be diligent in pursuing professional development and view themselves as lifelong learners. The inner drive to improve and the motivation to constantly improve and adjust their practical work are essential.

4.2. Suggestions

4.2.1. Educators should offer more positive encouragement

From the life stories of the five research participants, it is evident that a complex array of factors influenced their choice of social work. In summary, the influence of parents or caregivers on their personalities; previous negative work experiences; encountering good university teachers and participating in good activities during their social work studies; and the impact of their first supervisor and leader after entering the workforce. The author mainly offers some constructive suggestions based on the influence of important figures.

University teachers should offer more positive encouragement to social work students. The positive dissemination and encouragement from university teachers have a significant impact on social work studies. As the first to introduce social work education, the role of university teachers is crucial for social work students. University teachers should provide more positive and encouraging messages during their teaching, which will have a good influence. Practical experience is beneficial for teaching and enriches teaching methods, vividly presenting social work and stimulating students' interest in it. Additionally, positive encouragement from university teachers is also very important. We live in a society with mainstream values, and teachers are highly respected, especially in the eyes of students. Sometimes, a word from a respected teacher can change a student's life.

Supervisors and the first leader should provide guidance and support. The first leader after entering the workforce also has a significant impact on social workers. First, supervisors. During the internship period of social work students, university teachers should arrange suitable supervisors for each internship site, which is also very important for the improvement of students' practical abilities. Supervisors are like good mentors who accompany social workers, providing guidance and support not only in skills but also in psychology and emotions. A good supervisor is the best guide for social workers who are just starting out in the field. Second, choose a suitable and good social work internship site, and it is best if there is a good senior to guide them. 1. Between people, there is always a subtle mutual influence. The views of senior practitioners on the social work industry and their practical assistance to newcomers will enable social work students to feel the atmosphere of the entire industry.

4.2.2. Multiple development paths promote professional growth

The main ways of professional development are self-study through books, online research, and other means; in addition, peer-to-peer communication and sharing, such as study groups and training courses, etc. Autonomous learning and mentoring training are currently the most important ways of on-the-job training and capacity building.

Social system environment. The importance of the social system environment for the professional development of social work. In response to the imperfect management institutions of social work, the government should start from the top-level design and learn from advanced regions. Social work associations should make good use of resources, strictly control the registration of social work institutions, and carefully review the qualifications and personnel of the institutions. Regarding the qualification certification examination for social work, there should be more appropriate adjustments or increased difficulty. For example, the qualification access should be deepened, and only those who have received social work professional education can participate in the level certification examination.

Support system of social work institutions. From the perspective of the support system for social workers, this mainly refers to social work institutions. The support from institutions and the team support among colleagues will affect the professional development of social workers. Suggestions are made for the training of institutions and team building, hoping to cultivate social workers and teams in a deep and comprehensive way rather than just individual talents.

Self-traits and abilities of social workers. If social workers can deeply understand their own traits and abilities, accept the rotation of social work positions, and make career plans based on personal interests and learning requirements, and continuously pursue systematic further education in a challenging learning environment, it will be a very good way to enhance professional development. Rotating fields, trying different areas based on age and personal development, will provide a continuous upward motivation, a spiral upward trend, and enrich oneself.

5. Conclusion

This study employs narrative inquiry to explore the life trajectories of five practitioners with over two decades of experience in the social work profession. By examining their personal narratives, pivotal life events, and the influence of significant others, the research elucidates the diverse pathways and dual drivers—internal motivation and external pressures—that shape professional development in social work. The findings affirm that professional growth is shaped by a confluence of factors, including pre-service education, ongoing training, supervisory support, and self-directed learning. Moreover, the interplay between intrinsic passion and extrinsic challenges emerges as a central mechanism enabling practitioners to navigate burnout and sustain commitment to their professional mission. Furthermore, transformative experiences and supportive relationships serve as critical catalysts in shaping career choices and long-term engagement in the field.

As a profession grounded in human connection and social justice, social work demands not only individual resilience and continuous development but also systemic support, educational advancement, and institutional strengthening to advance its professionalization and occupational sustainability. While the insights and recommendations derived from this study may not fully represent the entirety of social workers' developmental journeys, they aim to offer meaningful guidance for students contemplating a career in social work, practical reference for early-career practitioners, and constructive input for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to address structural barriers and strengthen support systems within the sector. Looking ahead, the professional development of social workers will require sustained empirical and reflective inquiry. Only through the coordinated efforts of individuals, organizations, and society can this deeply value-laden and empathetic profession continue to evolve and thrive in its mission of serving individuals and empowering communities.

Acknowledgements

[Funding Project] Project of the Research Center for the Coordinated Development of Education and Economy and Society in Chengdu-Chongqing Region: "Exploration of the Advantages and Paths of Family Education Guidance from the Perspective of Social Work" (CYJXF22011)

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