

Research on the Identity Dilemma of Social Work Education in China from the Perspective of Social Ecosystem Theory

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Abstract: Given the problem of expanding scale and a lack of a professional identity in China's social work education, this paper will explore the systemic generation logic of this issue. According to the social ecosystem theory, this paper proposes that the construction of professional identity is the result of ongoing interactions among people and the macro-, meso-, and micro-systems. Based on interviews with 12 social work students, teachers and practitioners, it has been found that the ambiguous institutional incentives and low social prestige at the macro level, the theory-practice disconnect and weak support networks at the meso level, and the lack of supportive interactions among teachers, students and peers at the micro level are mutually connected and form a vicious circle of "systemic constraints–support fragmentation–identity dissolution." Therefore, in order to solve this problem, we need to go beyond single-level interventions and coordinate the reconstruction of all three systems (macro, meso, and micro) to cultivate ecological resilience and achieve the connotative development of social work education.

Keywords: Social ecosystem theory; Social work education; Identity

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1. Introduction

With the acceleration of China's social transformation and the deepening advancement of governance modernization, social work plays an increasingly prominent role in resolving social conflicts and improving people's livelihoods. The construction of a professional workforce has become a critical component of national strategy. By the end of 2022, there were 931,000 certified social workers nationwide; during the "14th Five-Year Plan" period, the total number of social work professionals in China is expected to reach 2 million^[1]. However, many current students have ambiguous professional identities, graduates show career choice instability, and the industry suffers from persistently high turnover rates, severely constraining the sustainable development of the profession. In Shanghai, for example, only one-third of the 15,000 certified social

workers are engaged in professional social work positions, with an annual turnover rate as high as 20–30%^[2]. In Shenzhen, known as the “Whampoa Military Academy” of social work, the turnover rate rose from 8.2% in 2008 to 22.2% in 2014, an increase of over 14% in just seven years, and this talent loss is not a localized phenomenon but a nationwide problem^[3]. This phenomenon reflects a deep crisis in social work professional education: students generally have weak professional identities, graduates exhibit high career mobility, and industry turnover remains high, all of which have severely constrained the sustainable development of the profession and the construction of a high-quality social service system.

Professional identity in social work refers to social workers’ perceptions of the meaning of their own activities and the degree of recognition of professional values, theories, and skills^[4]. However, the construction of professional identity among Chinese social work students currently faces systemic challenges. Existing research has largely attributed this phenomenon to factors such as low social awareness, ambiguous professional roles, lack of salary competitiveness, and low job–major match rates^[5]. Although these analyses offer explanatory power, they generally overlook the fact that professional identity is generated and evolves through the continuous, dynamic interaction between individuals and multi-layered environmental systems. In fact, students’ identification with the profession depends not only on the knowledge they acquire or employment prospects but also on whether they receive adequate support within nested ecosystems: emotional support and role modeling from teachers, peers, and families; identity transition and skill integration within educational and practice communities that connect classrooms, internships, and career exploration; and perceived social respect and institutional guarantees shaped by socio-cultural values and professional institutional arrangements. In short, the main reason students are in a state of professional identity crisis is that the multi-level ecosystem has failed to build a consistent, stable, supportive, and positive nurturing environment for them.

In the context of the above analysis, this paper will clarify the main research question: Against the backdrop of the continuous and rapid expansion of the overall scale of China’s social work professional talent pool, social work students generally suffer from weak professional identity. This, in turn, leads to severe industry talent attrition, and this article will focus on exploring the deep intrinsic reasons behind this industry phenomenon.

2. Literature review and analytical framework

2.1. Current status and challenges of professional identity

Based on a large amount of empirical research, it has been found that social work students in China generally have an unclear sense of professional identity, weak emotional commitment, and instability^[6]. Many students choose to enroll in a specific college or program due to institutional factors and may not have formed a sense of identity at the beginning; as a result, they are easily influenced by various external circumstances during their studies, which can directly affect their willingness to continue their studies as well as their postgraduate career trajectory, leading to a pattern of high graduate output alongside high occupational turnover within the field^[7]. National surveys have further revealed that this problem has extended into the occupational sphere, marked by the phenomena of “learning without doing” and “practitioners waiting for specialization,” alongside a paradox: graduates with formal social work training report markedly higher turnover intentions^[8].

This is not only a problem in China but also a widespread challenge linking social work education and practice globally. International research documents comparable concerns; a mixed-method study of

social work students in mainland China found that, despite widespread government expansion of social work academic programs, students' professional identity remains low, prompting numerous graduates to exit the field entirely ^[9]. In recent years, studies focusing on newly minted social work graduates indicate they frequently feel underprepared for postgraduation employment and encounter disorganization alongside insufficient workplace support; consequently, their professional identity is readily undermined, increasing early-career attrition risk ^[10]. Other studies confirm shifting career motivation patterns among social work students: traditional altruism- and justice-centered incentives are steadily declining, while personal career advancement and financial needs have become primary focal points for prospective practitioners ^[11]. This shift in intrinsic motivation has exerted substantial adverse effects on the durability and stability of professional identity.

2.2. Factors influencing professional identity in social work

Research has generally found that the factors affecting professional identity exist across multiple levels, yet existing scholarship often examines these factors in isolation or from a single perspective. Some studies indicate that students' helping motivations, personality traits, prior experiences, and acceptance of altruistic professional values serve as foundational influencing factors ^[12]. For instance, students who volunteer to lead group activities tend to develop a stronger sense of program participation and gain greater learning motivation as a result ^[13]. In addition, students' career aspirations and their perceptions of institutional prestige may clash with the prevailing view that social work occupies a marginal position within governance frameworks, which in turn weakens their professional identity ^[14].

Furthermore, scholars have emphasized that the rational design of social work curricula, heuristic teaching methods, instructors' professional competence and engagement, selection of internship sites, and the specialized nature of internship content, as well as the quality of internship supervision, have all been repeatedly demonstrated to play a pivotal role in shaping students' professional understanding, emotional experiences, and behavioral engagement ^[15]. Among these, an internship is a core link in identity development. Positive, supportive, and productive internship experiences greatly enhance identity, whereas negative and frustrating internship experiences can lead to identity crises ^[16]. Some scholars point out that if internships focus on administrative tasks rather than client-centered clinical engagement and direct intervention, they severely erode students' identification with the applicability and value of professional skills ^[17]. Research also indicates that the final year of study is a critical "liminal" phase of professional identity exploration, during which students undergo a transition and separation from student to professional identity ^[18]. At the same time, macro-level realities such as public awareness, recognition, and respect for social work, as well as the profession's salary, development opportunities, and institutional guarantees, are structural factors that students must confront to form enduring, behavioral identification ^[2]. Unclear career prospects and relatively weak social prestige often lead students into conflict between professional value identification and practical career considerations. Macro-level utilitarian social values affect the altruistic professional values of social workers and may lead them to feel that they have a low sense of belonging ^[19].

Although existing research on social work professional identity is relatively abundant, the topic still requires further exploration. First, most studies have focused on individual psychology, school education, or social environment criticism. While numerous influencing factors have been identified, they are often examined as independent or linear elements and fail to reveal the dynamic and interactive mechanisms

among them. Therefore, to systematically address the “professional identity dilemma” in social work education, a prevalent issue requiring in-depth investigation and remediation, this paper constructs an analytical framework covering the institutional, organizational, interactive, and individual experience levels.

2.3. Analytical framework

The Social Ecosystems Theory provides theoretical support for this framework. Bronfenbrenner’s theory posits that human development occurs through dynamic interactions across multiple environmental settings and centers on the core concept of “person-in-situation” ^[20]. Zastrow argued that bidirectional connections exist between individuals and their surrounding environments, defining individuals as comprehensive ecosystems integrating life, cognition, and society. On this basis, he established a three-tier analytical structure for social ecosystems: the macro system, the meso system, and the micro system.

Based on the above theories, this paper contextualizes the professional identity dilemma within a specific “education-occupation” ecosystem and argues that this dilemma stems from systemic dysfunction and individual subjective factors. Zastrow classified social ecosystems into three hierarchical levels: macro-system, meso-system, and micro-system ^[21]. Accordingly, this paper constructs a systematic analytical framework for the professional identity dilemma in China’s social work education:

2.3.1. Micro system: The student as an agentic subject

According to Zastrow’s system, the first level is the individual microsystem. In this study, social work students are regarded as a holistic system encompassing life, psychology, and adaptive functioning. The foundation of one’s professional identity lies in internal factors, such as learning motivation, personality traits, values, learning ability, and emotional stability. Individuals remain open to external changes and adjust their state accordingly. Based on the above, the microsystem also includes individuals’ immediate daily environments, such as peer learning experiences, early professional work experiences, and essential support networks. This analytical level examines how students develop initial professional perceptions, feelings, and behaviors through conscious and unconscious interactions between their personal ecosystems and surrounding environments.

2.3.2. Meso system: The key arena connecting individuals and organizations

The meso system refers to the small-scale groups and organizations that directly influence people, and it is the link connecting the individual micro system to the larger macro system. The families, classes, internship agencies, student organizations, and professional groups where the students are directly placed in this study are the main objects. Norms, support, and expectations for these groups, as well as their patterns of interaction and the quality of connections among different groups, are all ways in which students learn to live in society. At this level, the analysis is to determine whether the meso-systems can provide continuous support and paths for students’ socialization, or if they are dispersed and contain contradictory demands for roles; thus, how do they help or hinder the construction of students’ integrated professional self-identity in the face of all kinds of fragmented experiences?

2.3.3. Macro system: The structural background shaping the professional ecosystem

The macro system includes the general institutions, culture, social structure, and values of a society. It provides the basic “legitimacy” and “meaning system” for the existence and development of the profession

of social work. The main parts of the macro system in this study are dominant social values, the national welfare and governance system, higher education and professional certification policies, and the labor market structure. Although these macro forces do not directly involve the students, they have greatly affected the conditions, resource distribution, and career paths of the profession by providing resources, rules, and discourse at the level of the meso system. At this level of analysis, the aim is to study how the macro system provides for or restricts the opportunities and space for the development of the social work profession and for students in this field to build a foundation of identity.

The three tiers in the theory are the micro-system, the meso-system, and the macro-system. The identity dilemma in social work education can be explained as follows: Under the structural constraints of a certain macro system, the meso system cannot provide full and stable support for the micro system of students' agency, and individual agency is limited by internal and external resources under the pressure of the system; thus, students find it difficult to form or maintain a stable professional identity. The whole system can provide a certain direction for the research of problems in Chinese social work education.

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, the formation of professional identity among social work students is embedded within a multi-layered ecological system. At the micro level, individual attributes such as personality traits, motivation for enrollment, and learning ability serve as the foundational internal drivers. At the meso level, social contexts including peer groups, professional organizations, internship settings, and student associations exert significant influence through interaction and support. Finally, at the macro level, broader socio-cultural values and institutional frameworks shape the overarching climate within which professional identity is constructed. This hierarchical model suggests that professional identity is not an isolated psychological state but a dynamic outcome shaped by the interplay between individual characteristics and multi-level environmental systems.

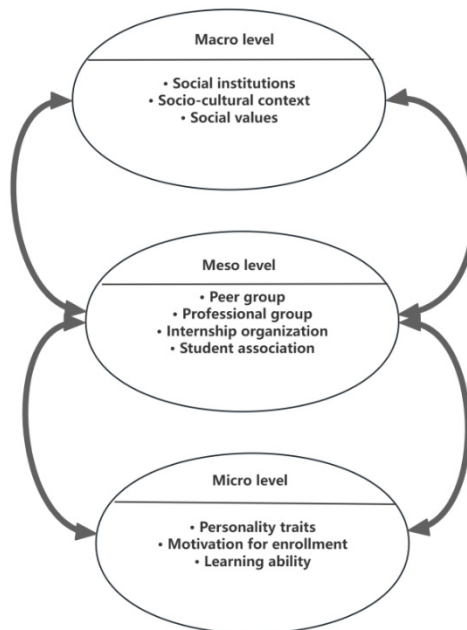


Figure 1. An analytical framework for professional identity in social work education from a social ecosystems perspective

3. Methodology

In order to better explore the construction process of professional identity in social work at all levels of the ecosystem and reveal the interaction mechanism among individuals and environmental systems, a method of qualitative research will be used in this study. Through in-depth studies of the individual experiences and values of the different cases in qualitative research, problems related to “identity” that are close to their actual circumstances, relationships, and development can be better understood. Through some specific interviews with different people in the education-occupation ecosystem, this paper will observe how students, teachers, and practitioners are affected by, use, or are constrained in the building of their own professional identities due to the various environmental resources and deficiencies of different levels in continuous interaction with the system. Based on the above research questions and given the all-encompassing nature of the ecosystem, a qualitative mixed-method approach will be employed in this paper to collect data through semi-structured in-depth interviews and other discussion materials, and the general situation of the ecosystem of identity dilemma will be presented after data triangulation.

3.1. Research participants and sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to select three groups of the main actors in the social work “education-occupation” ecosystem from all sides, such as individuals, organizations, and professional environments:

First, students. As the core experiencers and constructors of professional identity, embodying agency within the micro system, six students were interviewed, with one to two students selected from each year of study from first to fourth year. Sampling considered gender, place of origin, admission method, and academic performance to capture differentiated adaptation trajectories of individuals with different characteristics within the ecosystem.

Second, teachers. As key actors connecting the classroom, the school, and the professional community, teachers serve as important mediators of knowledge, value, and cultural transmission between systems. Three full-time teachers were interviewed, covering different professional titles and years of experience, to understand their own perceptions of the systemic environment and the roles they play in shaping students’ learning ecology.

Third, frontline social workers and agency managers. As representatives of the “exit” of professional education and the workplace environment, their experiences directly reflect the realities of the outer system. One frontline social worker, one professional social work supervisor, and one agency manager were selected from service agencies cooperating with universities for interviews, aiming to obtain feedback from the professional practice field and reveal the articulation between the school system and the professional system.

As shown in **Table 1**, a total of 12 participants were recruited for this study, comprising three distinct groups. The first group consists of five students (S1–S5), ranging from freshmen to seniors, with ages varying between 18 and 21. The second group includes three social work instructors (T1–T3) aged 28 to 56. The final group comprises four professionals (E1, M1, M2), including frontline social workers and agency administrators/managers aged 28 to 45. This purposive sampling strategy ensured a diverse representation of perspectives across different educational levels and professional roles within the field of social work.

Table 1. Basic information of interviewees

No.	Role	Age	Gender	Code
1	Freshman	18	Female	S1
2	Freshman	19	Female	S2
3	Sophomore	19	Male	S3
4	Junior	20	Female	S4
5	Senior	20	Female	S5
6	Senior	21	Male	S6
7	Social Work Instructor	28	Female	T1
8	Social Work Instructor	35	Female	T2
9	Social Work Instructor	56	Male	T3
10	Frontline Social Worker	28	Female	E1
11	Agency Administrator	40	Female	M1
12	Social Work Supervisor	45	Female	M2

3.2. Data collection

First, detailed interviews. One-on-one in-depth interviews were carried out with all the research subjects. According to the people's own experiences, perceptions, and patterns of interaction at the micro, meso, and macro levels, the interview guide was prepared, and an open-ended form was chosen to collect important events and reasons for them. The length of the interviews was 60–90 minutes. All the interviews were recorded with consent and then transcribed in their entirety.

Second, text analysis. In addition to interview data, relevant text materials have also been collected and analyzed to better understand the discourse of the macro-system; talent cultivation plans, internship manuals, industry reports, and policy documents are typical cases that show how the institutional and cultural environment for students' professional identity is formed.

Third, data analysis. Based on the constructivist grounded theory, three stages of coding were employed for this study. Analysis has found the reasons and connections at all levels in a system that determines one's life. Based on the above results, this paper will establish the basic narrative logic of how ecological systems affect the construction of professional identity.

3.3. Research ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Lingnan Normal University on 26 November, 2024.

This study met the ethics rules of the school. Before collecting the data, I obtained the informed consent of all the subjects and kept their identity and other private information confidential. After adjusting my way of looking at things, I have worked with my classmates many times to refine the design and analysis methods of the revision of this paper.

4. Findings

4.1. Layered presentation of the identity dilemma in social work education

According to the theory of social ecosystems, the problem of professional identity dilemma in Chinese social work education is not a single problem but rather a comprehensive phenomenon resulting from the interplay

of the institutional and cultural support system of the macro system, the organizational carrying capacity and operating mechanisms of the meso system, and the cognitive-behavioral experience of the individual at the micro level.

4.1.1. Structural constraints of the macro system: Coordinated failure of institutions, culture, and market

Firstly, weak institutional embeddedness and devaluation of “symbolic capital.” Although the central and local governments have issued policies promoting the professionalization of social work, critical institutions still face serious problems in the stages of “implementation” and “translation,” and have not been effectively incorporated into the existing social distribution and career development system. The basic professional qualification certification system is a typical case, and it still has a low “social exchange rate.” Many empirical studies have found that there is a weak link between this qualification certificate and one’s salary, professional position evaluation, and access to important posts. Some parts of the public sector do not consider it to be a professional technical qualification at all. There is a difference between the promises made by the institutions and what can actually be realized in practice; as a result, practitioners have lacked stable “institutional capital,” and the “symbolic value” of their professional identity has also declined to some extent, failing to meet both the need for attunement and prestige. A frontline social worker said frankly:

The social worker certificate is to some extent useful for dealing with the sub-district office and community committees of our organization, but it does not draw much attention from the general public. For the same work, the income will be the same whether one has the certificate or not. The ‘value’ of this certificate is too small. I feel that my years of study and examination have gone unnoticed by society. (E1)

Secondly, ambiguous social recognition and suspended professional authority. With the deepening of social changes, social work has gradually taken on more essential roles in addressing the various problems that arise in modern society; however, there is a contradiction between the high level of functional demand it can meet and the low recognition among the public. According to research, most people have an imprecise understanding of the professional position of social workers, often confusing them with traditional community managers or general volunteers, failing to grasp their special professional attributes, such as assessment and diagnosis, clinical intervention, resource integration, and policy advocacy. Therefore, although social work has always addressed problems of the common people, it lacks a certain sense of professionalism; it has not been accorded the same prestige or authority as that enjoyed by doctors and lawyers due to differences in specialized knowledge. Its primary values and ethical traits of altruism are also under considerable pressure in the current environment, which is largely performance-oriented and instrumental; therefore, although it has received positive social recognition, it has gradually fallen out of favor, losing one of the signs of professional prestige. An experienced practitioner and supervisor thought:

Even within some government departments or public institutions with which we collaborate, the professional identity of social work often finds itself in an awkward position. In project meetings or joint service activities, our professional input is sometimes regarded merely as “supplementary” or “consultative,” rather than as essential considerations grounded in technical expertise; our professional qualifications do not automatically receive the same level of respect and recognition as those of other technical professionals. (M2)

Thirdly, contradictions in market structure and a lack of professional incentives. From a macro-data perspective, the modernization of the social governance system has generated sustained incremental demand for social work talent. However, the structural characteristics of the labor market send contradictory signals:

on one hand, explicit job growth driven by policy; on the other, generally uncompetitive salary levels, unclear career development paths, and job instability and intensified involutionary competition arising from project-based purchasing of services. This market structure, where “scale expansion” decouples from “quality incentives,” sends complex signals to potential practitioners regarding career prospects. When lengthy professional education and career investment do not match predictable, decent economic returns and clear career prospects, the structural contradictions of the macro market directly translate into a key negative force eroding long-term professional commitment and value identification. As a student expressed in confusion:

Where do senior students go after graduation? It seems they end up doing all sorts of things, but few work in the profession itself. It's hard to find someone to ask about real career development—I don't even know who to ask. (S5)

Social work students' confusion stems precisely from the system's failure to delineate a visible, credible, and valuable professional development path. When a professional qualification is not linked to a clear promotional ladder, specialized further education opportunities, and favorable career endpoints, it remains for students an isolated, ambiguously meaningful “certificate” rather than a “passport” carrying future hopes. As a result, the credentials will no longer be linked to people's career paths, and it will not be convenient for them to participate.

4.1.2. Dysfunction of the meso system: Broken educational chain, suspended practice, and dispersed community

First, systemic decoupling between knowledge supply and practice demands. As the main site for cultivating professional competence, the social work education system in universities is far from keeping up with changes in local practice. First of all, there has been slow progress in the updating of curriculum knowledge. Many courses and their contents are still based on a relatively fixed disciplinary logic, emphasizing the inheritance of the Western theoretical lineage and the integrity of the classical knowledge system, but they do not offer timely and systematic answers to new problems, new circumstances, and new areas of practice that have arisen due to local governance reform. The long administrative procedures for curriculum reform have made it more difficult to keep up with changes in knowledge, and by the time it reaches the classroom, new development trends may have already faded. Second, there is a lack of application and experience in the teaching model. Although practice teaching is generally promoted, it often serves as an addition or verification of theoretical teaching and does not integrate with the whole course according to complex problems in real life. The skills students acquire through simulated or short-term practice are often fragmented and decontextualized, resulting in grossly insufficient development of systematic practical competence, clinical judgment, ethical sensitivity, and cross-contextual adaptability. The gap between educational supply and complex practice demands undermines students' trust in the authority of the professional knowledge they have learned, as it has limited explanatory power and effectiveness when facing real-world work scenarios. A fourth-year student reflected on his learning experience:

We learned many Western models of group work and casework in class and memorized many theories. But last summer, I interned in a 'digital back-feeding' community project, teaching the elderly how to use smartphones and prevent fraud. The class had never taught how to systematically intervene in such a scenario. I felt a chasm between what I learned and what I had to use. (S4)

Second, institutional suspension and lack of support in internship education. Professional internships should be a critical liminal phase for transitioning from “student” to “practitioner” status, a core ritual for

operationalizing theory and professionalizing identity. However, current internship education has largely fallen into a state of institutional suspension. On one hand, the content and process design of internships are highly heterogeneous and often superficial. Many internship positions are for administrative assistance and activity organization in community and grassroots service organizations, so students are unable to participate in the core technical areas of the profession, such as case management, project evaluation, and policy advocacy. Internships often become low-skill labor or merely a ceremonial display of being present at the company without any systematic training. First and foremost, the cooperative oversight mechanism is weak or absent in reality. Ideally, the supervision of effective internships should be jointly undertaken by the practice supervisors of the agencies and the academic advisors at the universities to create a dual-guidance system that promotes the all-round development of students. In reality, agency supervisors are often too busy with heavy service demands to supervise students properly, or do not receive specific training in teaching supervision. Due to the distance from the school and lack of practical experience, the university mentor cannot be in the classroom frequently. Without such “supportive infrastructure,” the students will be left alone to face the problem of values, morals, and ethics, as well as failures in practice. Internships, which are supposed to help students strengthen their sense of purpose, may instead be a reason for them to lose interest in study and feel powerless. There are practice parts, but their design is often too simple; therefore, deep learning and application cannot be realized. A student was dissatisfied with the content of the class:

Our “practice class” was in the form of group interviews based on scripts provided by the teacher, and it felt very artificial. It was not as complex as the actual cases I would come to know at the agency. There were no genuine ethical problems or feelings of helplessness due to the lack of resources in the simulations. (S2)

4.1.3. Micro system: Identity dissolution mechanisms in direct interactional fields

As the primary environment for people’s socialization and the direct surroundings in daily life, it is where a person’s sense of professional identity is first formed and developed. At this level, the construction of professional identity is not in isolation but is also reflected in actual role behavior, group dynamics, and people’s own interpretation of meaning over time. At present, there are many problems for social work students in the field of micro-interactions, such as a lack of support resources, inconsistent normative references, and exhausted agentic capacity. All of the above are the reasons for the collapse of their new professional identity.

First of all, insufficient emotional and cognitive support in teacher–student interactions. During the process of professional socialization, teachers’ interactions with students often contain important information about professionalism in addition to conveying knowledge. Teachers are the “close people” who provide the necessary emotional and cognitive support for students to internalize professional values and develop a sense of professional identity through their enthusiasm for their work, honesty, etc. However, in fact, there are many differences in the quality and depth of teacher-student interaction. If the teacher’s interaction with students is merely the transmission of rote knowledge, or if the teacher himself shows instrumental and detached behavior in the course of his work, then his symbolic power as a model and gatekeeper of the profession will be weakened. Such interactions fail to convey sufficient emotional power and values to the students, and may even send an implicit signal of uncertainty about the profession; thus, it is difficult to motivate the students to have a strong sense of professional identity and commitment. A third-year student said:

Most teachers just lecture from PPTs, highlight key points, and tell us who proposed this theory or how

many steps the model has. As soon as class ends, they leave. We rarely have the chance to hear them talk about why they chose social work, or their biggest challenges and sense of achievement in their work. It feels like they are... 'transmission stations' of knowledge, rather than 'companions' moving us forward. (S4)

Subsequently, normative referencing and pressure transmission effects of peer groups. Peer groups constitute the most direct and frequent “reference group” for students to evaluate themselves and plan their futures. During the formation of professional identity, everyday discourse and practical choices among peers regarding course value, internship experiences, career prospects, and professional prestige create a powerful informal normative environment and comparative pressure. When the micro environment is saturated with widespread anxiety about career prospects, doubts about professional value, and active discussion of alternative career paths, this group atmosphere generates strong contagion and reinforcement effects. An individual’s choice of and persistence in the profession are no longer based solely on personal internal value judgments but require continuous justification and adjustment within the peer group’s “collective discourse” and “shared anxiety.” This intense social comparison and group pressure continuously impact individuals’ still-fragile professional beliefs, easily inducing self-doubt and strategic distancing from the professional path. A student described a typical conversation atmosphere in his dormitory:

Three of us in our four-person dorm were assigned to this major against our will. Late-night chats often revolved around ‘what’s the point of studying this’ and ‘what can we do after graduation.’ If one person says a senior said jobs are hard to find, immediately others start sharing the ‘bleak’ cases they’ve heard. Although everyone might just be venting, the more we talk, the more real the feeling that ‘this major has no future’ becomes. It’s like air—breathe it long enough, and you start believing it yourself. (S3)

Finally, adaptive contraction of individual agency under structural constraints. When the macro institutional environment and meso organizational support systems persistently transmit vague, contradictory, or negative feedback, individual positive agency faces the risk of being inhibited, reversed, or even depleted. Facing multiple structural tensions—the gap between professional education and social needs, frustrating internship experiences, unclear career rewards, and increasing peer pressure—students’ initial value-based investment becomes difficult to sustain. As an adaptive strategy, individuals’ behavioral logic may shift significantly from “value-rationality” to “instrumental rationality,” manifested in reallocating energy and resources toward preparing for generalist credentials, pursuing double majors in more market-competitive fields, or strategically avoiding deep professional practice. This “adaptive contraction” of agency represents an emotional withdrawal and behavioral downgrading of professional identity under systemic pressure, a key manifestation of early hidden professional talent loss and identity crisis at the micro-action level. The reflection of a senior student who once held a strong sense of social justice is highly representative:

As a freshman, I genuinely wanted to use this major to ‘help people help themselves’ and make a difference. But after several years of study, what I saw, heard, and experienced in internships was the marginalization of the profession, low income, and narrow prospects. I haven’t given up the idea of ‘helping,’ but I’ve started to think that maybe first entering a stable system through the civil service exam, with a larger platform and more resources, would allow me to act more effectively. My current choice feels more like a... circuitous strategy. (S5)

4.2. Systemic generative mechanism of the identity dilemma in social work education

The professional identity dilemma in social work education is not the result of a single missing element

but is rooted in a continuous process of dissipation and misalignment from institutional design, through organizational transmission, to individual practice. Within an ideal professionalization model, macro-institutional frameworks must be communicated and advocated at the meso level by education and professional bodies to provide continuous career support to students. This support should be structured, clear, and appealing. According to the results outlined above, there are serious “loss of effectiveness” and “misalignment of transfer” issues, which manifest at all support chain levels. These issues hinder the construction of the professional identity of subjects.

First, at the macro-institutional level, there is a structural tension between the “symbolic promise” of institutions and their “implementation efficacy.” Although the state has introduced a series of policies to advance the professionalization and vocationalization of social work, the cohesion and cross-sectoral linkages of key institutional arrangements are insufficient. Taking the professional qualification certification system as an example, its “social exchange rate” has remained low for a long time, failing to achieve institutionalized articulation with core social resource allocation mechanisms such as salary systems, professional title promotion, and public service job appointments. This means that although macro policies establish a normative direction for professionalization, they have not simultaneously provided substantive incentives and guarantees sufficient to support the credibility of that direction. The persistent gap between institutional promises and individuals’ predictable returns fundamentally erodes the institutional legitimacy on which professional identity depends.

Second, at the meso-organizational level, there is a “structural decoupling” of the education system from the professional system and an “institutional suspension” of practice support. Universities, as the main talent cultivation bodies, show significant lag and disconnection between their curricula, teaching models, and the rapidly evolving practice of social work, manifested in slow knowledge updates and insufficient depth in practice teaching. At the same time, the internship period should be a good combination of theory and practice to help form an individual’s professional awareness; However, because there is a lack of a collaborative supervision mechanism, it often ends up being merely formal participation or superficial work, and thus fails to provide an organized learning path for profound professional socialization. Another problem is that there is a lack of integrated professional networks among cross-institutional and cross-regional industry associations, and the channel for informal career transmission via alumni networks has been cut off. It will not help to build a good social support and resource-sharing network for the professional “community” that has been planned at the macro level. Meso-organizations cannot shoulder the responsibility of mediation and support at a large scale; as a result, the supply of professional development support has been dispersed and weakened, daily educational arrangements are fragmented, inefficient, and sometimes inconsistent, and an all-encompassing system to support people’s professional development has failed to be formed.

Finally, at the level of micro-interaction, there is a sense of “scarcity of supportive resources” and “normative peer pressure” among individuals; when the ambiguous macro incentives and fragmented meso support are translated into the daily lives of students, they manifest as weak value guidance and emotional support in teacher-student interactions, as well as pervasive career anxiety and instrumentalist discourses about the future among peers, and a sense of powerlessness and frustration during internships. There are few good role models at the micro level, and the normative reference pressure from peers is relatively high. As cognitively agentive subjects, students have constantly received negative feedback from all sectors of the system and frequently adjusted their strategic logic for behavior; that is to say, they have switched from

value-rationality-oriented “commitment” to instrumental-rational “distancing.” This can be observed in the reallocation of time and energy to obtain generalist qualifications, pursue double majors in more market-competitive fields, or actively avoid deep involvement in professional practice. At the micro level, this “contraction of agency” is a behavior that reflects the institutional idleness and organizational failure at the meso level from an individual’s standpoint, and it shows that the professional identity has been declining from the bottom up.

4.3. Recommendations for enhancing professional identity in social work education

4.3.1. Macro level: Translating the concept of “professional high-quality development” into institutional rules

First, boost the institutional credibility and market value of professional qualifications. Deepen and strengthen the mandatory link between professional qualifications and the main career development path of salary, title promotion, and job allocation, and continuously address the problem of a low “social exchange rate.” It should be understood that this is not only a technical adjustment but also an explicit signal to the market and society that professional value is acknowledged by institutions, thus reinforcing the fundamental legitimacy of professional identity. Set up a policy coordination and evaluation system for the cooperation of professionals. Establish an interdepartmental policy coordination platform to find and rectify any inconsistencies in goals, norms, resources, etc., in the policy across all sectors systematically. Explore introducing a “professional development impact assessment” mechanism to carry out ex-ante analysis and ex-post evaluation of the effects of major social policies on the professional ecology, job demand, and workforce structure of social workers, ensure consistency in the macro-policy system, etc. Thirdly, make some plans for public investment in professional training. The allocation of public resources should be in line with the direction of “priority support” and “precision empowerment,” to increase the overall investment in the cultivation of basic talent and set up special funds to support talent reserves in central and western areas, exploration of new practice fields, and construction of professional infrastructure, such as supervision systems. Local governments should be motivated to issue different, specific policies based on the actual conditions of their respective areas and promote positive synergy between the national direction of work and local innovation.

4.3.2. Meso level: Translating the concept of “collaborative education” into organizational operational mechanisms

First, build a “university-government-agency” cooperation mechanism to produce knowledge and reform the curriculum. The main issue is that universities are not only knowledge centers but also active collaborators in open innovation; we need to open up. A “Practice Innovation Consortium” to be formed jointly by universities, practice agencies, and professional associations should be established officially. To address the many problems at the front line, action research can be carried out to set up a few typical teaching cases, simulation training modules, and dynamic competency standards. At the same time, reforms should be carried out in the internal teaching evaluation and incentive system of universities, and practical results such as teachers’ active participation in the supervision of practice and joint development of local teaching resources should be included in the main contents of evaluation, such as title promotion and performance assessment, to promote a fundamental shift in the role of teachers from “theoretical lecturers” to “reflective practice guides” and “collaborative knowledge producers.”

Second, build a good and helpful institutional system for internship education. There are problems with the uniformity of quality standards and systematic guarantees for internships, and some have had to be canceled. We need to restructure the whole system of internships. First, in conjunction with professional associations, the provincial education authorities should take the lead to develop and mandate the implementation of “Quality Standards for Social Work Internships,” clarifying the goals, procedures, supervision, and evaluation of internships. Secondly, a system should be created to certify the qualifications of the dual (agency-university) supervisors, provide systematic training, offer regular incentives and share responsibilities, and ensure the professionalism and dedication of the supervisors. The fiscal allocation should include a “special internship supervision subsidy,” and the high-quality supply of internship positions by agencies can be used as one of the indicators for participating in government service procurement, grading, and assessment, other preferential policies, etc. Information technology can be used to build a general-purpose internship management platform that covers all links in the record-keeping, supervision, and assessment of internships, presentation of learning paths, tracking of learning results, etc.

Finally, strengthen the construction of the professional community and promote intergenerational transmission. If the damaged professional network is unable to provide stable identity and development support for students and young practitioners, it will have little effect on them. The construction of a “community of practice” should be conducted in an organized way. The hub and platform functions of the national and regional social work education associations should be strengthened to organize regular, institutionalized cross-institutional and cross-regional academic seminars, practice workshops, student case competitions, career development forums, etc., to create opportunities for sustained interaction. Organize and continuously update the “alumni network and professional mentor database” to provide all sorts of detailed career guidance, mentoring, emotional support, etc., for students. At the same time, online-offline professional communities based on service areas or thematic interests should be actively promoted and supported to facilitate the flow of tacit knowledge, peer support, continuous professional dialogue, etc., and connect dispersed individuals into a professional community with a strong sense of belonging, support, and collective action.

4.3.3. Micro level: Translating the concept of “identity construction” into interactive practices and supportive experiences

First, build a “development-oriented” system of communication and values between teachers and students. Teacher-student interaction is the main type of relational context for professionalization. It should not only be about instruments of academic teaching but also about creating comprehensive development systems for students. The primary part is the all-round mentoring system; that is, each student will be paired with a professional mentor from the start of their studies to establish a regular and structured mentoring relationship throughout their college years, covering subjects, learning the value of work, internship reflection, personalized career planning, etc. At the same time, a series of contextualized seminars on “Professional Values and Ethics” should be held, and senior faculty members and outstanding practitioners from all sectors of society can lead them. At this time, various immersive methods can be used to provoke deep thought about values and emotions, such as role-playing, ethical dilemma simulation debates, and sharing the life stories of service users, etc., to convert abstract professional ethics into experiential and discussable practical wisdom, thus strengthening the foundation of professional identity in both cognition and emotion.

Second, put forward the concept of “reflective support” in peer learning and internship supervision. Peer groups and internship experiences are both positive and negative influences on one’s identity. They should be designed to be supportive learning communities and places that can foster resilience. A model of “reflective practice circle” should be established in the classes and internship groups to have experienced supervisors guide students to engage in regular, structured collective narration, analysis, and meaning negotiation of specific situations encountered during the internship, emotional changes, successful experiences, ethical dilemmas, etc. The problems or misunderstandings of the individuals will serve as learning material for everyone. The three stages of the support system will be: expectation management, process support, and meaning integration, at this time of the internship. Before the start of the internship, help the students have a realistic understanding of what difficulties they will encounter during professional work; during the internship, provide timely emotional support and professional guidance; after experiencing setback, have them learn how to deal with it and record these difficulties carefully; and then, at the end, guide them to systematically analyze their entire experience to add depth and meaning to it.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Based on the theory of social ecosystems, this paper studies the problem of both “scale expansion” and “professional identity crisis” in Chinese social work education. According to the analysis, the problem of professional identity does not stem from a single cause but is rather the result of functional dysfunction, communication breakdown, and other issues in the macro, meso, and micro levels of the system.

This paper does not propose that “ecosystem dysfunction” is directly caused by a “crisis in professional identity”; instead, according to the theory of the social ecosystem, it is known that several levels within a system have been continuously adjusting themselves and changing in opposition to one another. Based on the above analysis, this study believes that the emergence of an identity crisis is caused by some systemic structural problems and is also affected by people’s own interpretation of reality, emotions, etc., in daily life. They are not passive victims who just suffer the pressure from the system; rather, in response to this pressure from the system, they have found ways to make adjustments to themselves or leave, making active choices and giving meaning to the circumstances. Therefore, resolving the dilemma should not only address the repairs to system functions but also pay attention to and shape the support experiences and meaning-making processes in daily life.

What needs to be discussed in more detail is that, in the background of the massification and marketization of higher education around the world, along with rising labor market uncertainty, the chain linking professional education to the realization of its social value may face general pressure. The meso- and micro-level phenomena that have been observed in social work education, such as “practice disconnection,” “community fragmentation,” and “emotional exhaustion,” may also appear in other fields of practice-oriented applied professional education in different forms. A model for the analysis of all kinds of problems will also be put forward in this paper, such as high investment and high turnover, or a lack of connection between study and application.

At the same time, this paper is only an initial exploration. In the future, the following research directions can be explored: First, through comparative studies in various areas, institutions, and professions, it will be possible to determine how all kinds of ecosystem arrangements affect the path and results of identity construction. Second, by means of long-term tracking studies, the whole life course and important transition

stages of professional identity from pre-service education to the beginning of one's career and later life can be mapped out. Third, by extending the scope of international comparison and considering different stages of development, it will be feasible to examine how ecosystem structures relate to identity outcomes in social work and other professional training under different welfare systems, different higher education models, and different socio-cultural conditions. Through the above efforts, a more general theoretical model that can explain the dynamic relationship between professional identity and ecosystem support will be constructed one step at a time to provide knowledge references for addressing common problems in professional education around the world.

In this paper, it has been shown that professional identity is, in fact, a process of legitimization internalization within an "institutional profession" that is based on many logics. The identity crisis in social work is, in fact, a small-scale manifestation of the failure of the state governance logic, professional logic, and market logic to achieve institutional coupling in the ecosystem. Therefore, to resolve this problem, not only is technical repair needed, but also the intrinsic value of the profession must be built into the institutional design to move beyond being just a governance tool and inspire lasting identity and commitment in individuals through value consensus. This is not to say it lacks instrumental rationality in a simplistic way. Instead, it is suggested that the legitimacy of a profession in modern society should be based on its distinctive and essential contributions to society. When a profession is used as an optional instrument to realize the external objectives of policy, it may lose its internal motivation for purpose in the minds of the people.

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