

# Analysis of the Support System for Social Workers' Competency Enhancement from the Perspective of Ecosystem Theory

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## ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the ecosystem theory and systematically analyzes the support system for social workers' competency enhancement from the interaction between civil affairs departments, street community management departments, social organizations, residents, families and schools. In the special research, the specific competency of social workers' various qualities and abilities is understood: in general, the moral quality competency of social workers is strong, while the working ability and method are the key factors that need to be improved. The biggest difficulty among the 13 difficulties currently faced by social workers is their own lack of experience. Therefore, only if the ecological support system of social workers works, can social workers' competency be effectively improved so as to adapt to the needs of the times.

**Keywords:** *Ecosystem theory, Social work, Competency, Support system.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social workers, i.e., those who engage in social work, play an important role in preventing and solving social problems, maintaining social stability and order, and promoting social progress (Liu Xi, 2011). Especially since the COVID-19 epidemic, the community, as a position of prevention and control, needs multiple forces to collaborate and play their respective roles, among which social workers provide psychological guidance, serve the fundamental population, link resources, mobilize organizations, and promote community governance. Then the competency analysis of social workers will help promote the construction of a professional talent team, better play the professional role of social workers, and thus also promote the localization of social work research.

In previous studies, some achievements have been made in the establishment and testing of the competency index system of social workers, which provides reference for this study. This study mainly focuses on the competency analysis of social workers since the development of the COVID-19 epidemic, and through the introduction of the ecosystem theory, it is easier to sort out the

competency support system and improvement path of social workers more clearly.

People are in the context. There is an interactive relationship between human behavior and the social environment. The social environment influences human behavior. This paper is also a systematic study of how social workers can improve their competencies in the face of changing social environments.

## 2. CONSTRUCTION AND ANALYSIS OF SUPPORT SYSTEM

Ecosystem theory is a branch of systems theory that focuses on examining people in the context of environmental systems, paying attention to describing how the human ecosystem interacts with people and influences their behavior, revealing the important influence of family and social systems on individual growth. It is a theory that examines the interaction of human behavior with the social environment. It views the social environment in which humans grow and live as a social ecosystem. It emphasizes the importance of the ecological environment (human survival system) for the analysis and understanding of human behavior, and

focuses on the interaction between human and environmental systems and their significant impact on human behavior, and is one of the important basic theories of social work.

Especially during the COVID-19 epidemic, social workers are basically engaged in front-line work. Faced with the high-intensity epidemic prevention work, they have to face both physical tests and professional services, as well as self-mental adjustment, which is far more difficult than the work during non-epidemic periods. They also need to be supported by multiple parties. According to the ecosystem theory, based on the analysis of human behavior and social environment, combined with the actual work of social workers, they need to interact with civil affairs departments, street community management departments, social organizations, residents, families and schools, etc., thus also constituting a support system for social workers.

### ***2.1 Civil Affairs Departments***

In China, the Ministry of Civil Affairs is the administrative authority for social work, and its main responsibilities include formulating policies and standards for social work and volunteer services, and promoting the construction of social work personnel and volunteer teams with relevant departments. For example, in response to the COVID-19 epidemic, civil affairs departments have developed a series of social assistance policies. They also propose specific requirements for social work after the normalization of epidemic prevention and control. Social workers should carry out humanistic care throughout the implementation, so that the subject of relief can really feel the warmth of the government and society. As advocates and servicers, it's needed to keep abreast of policy information and deliver policies to others' home; as helpers and supporters, they should have strength within themselves in order to make the service object rely on and trust them. Therefore, efforts should be made to strengthen comprehensive capacity building, enhance the learning of basic medical and management knowledge, etc., and cultivate comprehensive abilities such as organization and coordination, as well as have empathy, understand the inner heart of the service object and let him see his own needs in order to awaken and accompany him out of his predicament. This provides a clear direction for social workers to serve. Local civil affairs departments also provide appropriate training for

social workers to meet the need for skill enhancement, such as self-protection methods and service methods during the epidemic.

### ***2.2 Street Community Management Departments***

Social workers are partly personnel belonging to street community management departments and partly full-time staff of social work agencies whose services are purchased by the streets. The support relationship between the two is not the same. The management and training of social workers in the former is provided by the street community management. In contrast, the social workers of the latter belong to the social work agency, and the management and training are provided by the social work agency. And due to the business relations, social workers need to be supported by the street community management in their services, such as resources and funding. During the epidemic, social workers often act as front-line epidemic prevention personnel, and the corresponding epidemic prevention training is provided by the health department. Social workers focus on services for special groups, while providing psychological guidance and other services to community residents.

### ***2.3 Work Units***

Social workers work in social work agencies, foundations, unions, etc. These work units establish special social work positions with clear job requirements to highlight the professionalism of social work. Work units will provide social workers with internal and external supervision, as well as some professional training. Local social work associations will also provide some professional training, especially in supervision training, which has relatively formed a more mature operation mechanism. This provides corresponding support for social workers to enhance their competency at work. It can solve the technical problems of social workers' daily work as well as realize the technical knowledge reserve. In addition, self-identity and self-emotional guidance are very important in social work, and the work unit supervision system plays a timely role in this regard.

### ***2.4 Residents***

Residents are the ones with whom social workers have frequent interactions and are the ones they serve. Social workers respond to the needs of the service object and use social work expertise to

achieve the goal of helping people to help themselves. This is the process of empowering and energizing the service object. The process of interacting with the service object is also the process of changing the social worker's sense of accomplishment and gain. If the service object starts from helplessness to positive changes and his problems are solved with the help of social workers, the sense of achievement and fulfillment of social workers is enhanced and the sense of personal identification with the value of social work is strengthened. During the epidemic, social workers face more complex problems, and due to some uncertainties, residents may become anxious and may even become depressed at the beginning of the containment and after a relatively long period of time. At this time, if there is no support and understanding from residents, it will also enhance the sense of powerlessness of social workers. Conversely, the positive cooperation and support of residents is also an incentive for social workers to be more persistent and active in overcoming difficulties in providing services.

## **2.5 Families**

Family is the basic unit of social composition. Family performs an emotional support function. In previous research, it was learned that when a social worker receives family support, she/he has more stable career development and a stronger sense of identification with social work. During the epidemic, social workers, who are engaged in front-line epidemic prevention, are the most vulnerable groups and are unable to take care of their families. They devote their time and energy completely to epidemic prevention work, and sacrifice their own families for the sake of others. The understanding and support of the family is especially important at this time, as their rear. Stability in the rear is a strong support, which helps them to fight in the front line. On the other hand, during the epidemic, social workers may not only have to face more negative emotions than the service object, but also have to deal with personal physical and mental exhaustion and negative emotional guidance from the attack, so the emotional support function of the family at this time will make social workers feel warm and motivated.

## **2.6 Schools**

Schools provide professional education for social workers. On the one hand, students of social work in schools receive arrangements for various

courses and practical training for talent development to solidify their professional foundation and skills. Especially in higher vocational institutions that cultivate applied technical skills, they highlight the practical ability of students and train them based on job requirements, so as to shorten the social adaptation period of students and enable them to engage in social work positions and put into professional work relatively quickly. The quality of school training directly affects the professional level of practitioners in the entire social work industry. The higher the proportion of social work major students trained by schools to engage in their corresponding professional positions, the more people will take root and develop in the industry, and the level of social workers will be raised accordingly. Therefore, the talent training system and mode of professional education in schools will lay the foundation for social workers' competency enhancement. On the other hand, the enrollment of students of master and doctoral degrees in social work major in schools also provides opportunities for social workers to upgrade their academic qualifications and promote the professional development of the whole profession by aligning with the academic frontier. Schools play an important role in the development of localized social work in China.

## **3. ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESULTS**

Studies that analyze the competency of social workers are more useful in exploring the support system. Based on the previous research results, drawing on the common evaluation criteria of competency in China and abroad, and referring to Zhu Danyao's (2019) study, this paper distills the basic elements of community social workers' competency, including moral quality (political literacy, ideology and morality and ethics), working ability (organizational and management ability, communication and coordination ability, emergency handling ability, community service ability, and team cooperation ability), and knowledge ability (professional knowledge and legal knowledge). Therefore, this study has further sorted out and constructed the index system of social worker competency based on the previous work, clarified the measured variables, and conducted a special survey on social worker competency. The survey was conducted in May-June 2022, and the respondents were those who were engaged in social work positions. 921 valid questionnaires were collected using the online survey method, and the competency self-

measurement scale consisted of 36 questions and was assessed in 4 dimensions. After variable conversion, the total score of 100 was used for the conversion of each variable score. Analysis of the statistical results shows that the mean score of the competency self-assessment score of social workers is 77.96, which is in the above-average level. Also, after comparing with the surrounding colleagues, the proportion of individuals who evaluate their own work competency as "very strong" is 18.7%, the proportion of "relatively strong" is 45.2%, the proportion of "general" is 29.5%, the proportion of "relatively weak" is 3.4%, and the proportion of

"very weak" is 0.9%. Both results show that the competency of social workers still needs to be improved. As shown in "Table 1", in terms of competency scores for specific competencies, 100 is full marks, and the top three average scores are ethics — 79.39, ideology and morality — 79.08, and team cooperation ability — 78.33. The lowest score is the community service ability with an average score of 77.20. It can be told that, in general, the moral quality competency of social workers is strong, while the working ability and method are the key factors that need to be improved.

Table 1. Specific average scores for each competency item

| Element           | Item                                   | Score |
|-------------------|--|-------|
| Moral quality     | Political literacy                     | 77.42 |
|                   | Ideology and morality                  | 79.08 |
|                   | Ethics                                 | 79.39 |
| Working ability   | Organizational and management ability  | 77.94 |
|                   | Communication and coordination ability | 77.41 |
|                   | Emergency handling ability             | 77.96 |
|                   | Community service ability              | 77.20 |
|                   | Team cooperation ability               | 78.33 |
| Knowledge ability | Professional knowledge                 | 77.90 |
|                   | Legal knowledge                        | 77.50 |

Analyzing the dilemmas of social workers will help identify problems in the support system so that the problems can be effectively addressed and social workers' competency can be enhanced. As shown in "Table 2", among the 13 difficulties faced by social workers, the biggest difficulty is their lack of experience, with 47.1% of social workers having this difficulty, which is nearly half; the second most important difficulty is planning and developing unique service projects, with 33.2% of social workers having this difficulty; the third greatest difficulty is low income, and the proportion of social workers with this difficulty is 30.9%. As for the excessive workload of epidemic prevention and control outbreaks, the proportion of social workers with this difficulty is 23.5%. The least difficulty chosen is the formation of good cooperation with other relevant departments, only with a percentage of 11%. These difficulties also reflect, to some extent, the state of support from the civil affairs departments, street community management departments, social organizations, residents, families and schools. Thus, the dilemmas of social workers are yet to be resolved with the efforts of various parties.

Table 2. Situational analysis of the current dilemmas faced by social workers

| Difficulty  | Frequency of being chosen | Percentage of being chosen |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Lack of experience  | 434                       | 47.1                       |
| Planning and developing unique service projects   | 306                       | 33.2                       |
| Low income  | 285                       | 30.9                       |
| Lack of theoretical knowledge of management and leadership  | 257                       | 27.9                       |
| Team building   | 240                       | 26.1                       |
| Insufficient understanding of the relevant policy environment and laws and regulations, opposition from relatives and friends | 230                       | 25.0                       |
| Use and selection of social work techniques   | 220                       | 23.9                       |
| Excessive workload of epidemic prevention and control outbreak  | 216                       | 23.5                       |
| Overly complicated criteria for program evaluation/assessment   | 205                       | 22.3                       |
| Lack of objects to study, learn from and imitate  | 201                       | 21.8                       |
| Can't keep outstanding talents  | 185                       | 20.1                       |
| Lack of sustainability of government purchased services   | 173                       | 18.8                       |
| Formation of good cooperation with other relevant departments   | 108                       | 11.7                       |

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The competency of social workers is still at a stage where it needs to be improved. Through the support system, the role of civil affairs departments, street community management departments, social organizations, residents, families and schools can be brought into play. Facing the changes in social development and the requirements of the changing times, social workers, as front-line workers serving residents, should have solid competency and literacy to better grasp the needs of the service object and provide practical services. This is also a reflection of the professionalism of social work.

The study of competency has identified the problems, so how to better solve them? In addition to analyzing the role of the support system, the collaboration of various forces still needs to go further on the path of standardization, which mainly includes standardized job guidelines for management departments, clarification of the functions of street community management departments, industry regulations for social organizations, and social-level publicity and increased awareness and recognition of social workers. The continued promotion of localized research in social work will also be a driving force for the entire industry. In China's development process, social work should be allowed to play its full professional role to serve the people and benefit the society.

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