A Study on the Professional Dilemmas of Community Workers Based on Grounded Theory

-- A Case Study of City Y in Shandong Province, China

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Abstract: To explore the manifestations and formation mechanisms of the professional dilemmas faced by community workers, this study is based on Constructivist Grounded Theory and employs methods such as interviews and literature analysis to investigate the connotation and structure of these professional dilemmas. The study finds that they encompass four dimensions: interpersonal relationships, job burnout, future development, and psychological barriers. It proposes a model of the formation path of professional dilemmas for Chinese community workers, emphasizing that institutional regulations, social support and understanding, as well as the individual role positioning and professional cognition of community workers, influence the formation of their professional dilemmas. Based on this, the study discusses recommendations such as the government promoting the construction of institutional systems, the community atmosphere strengthening humanistic care, community organization construction focusing on professionalism, and society enhancing external recognition. The research results have expanded new areas in the study of community workers' professional dilemmas and laid an important foundation for an in-depth analysis of the professional dilemmas of community workers under a multidimensional social system including government policies and community resources.

Keywords: Community Workers, Professional Dilemmas, Grounded Theory

1. Introduction

The "14th Five-Year Plan for the Construction of Urban and Rural Community Service Systems," issued by the State Council in April 2021, emphasizes that strengthening the construction of community service systems in urban and rural areas is a significant measure to consolidate the foundation of the national governance system and capabilities at a new stage of development [1]. Community workers, as the main force in promoting grassroots social governance, are the pillar of community development and play an important role in the development and improvement of society. Therefore, strengthening the team building of community workers is of certain importance and necessity. On April 10, 2024, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General

Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on Strengthening the Team Building of Community Workers," which clearly pointed out that strengthening the team building of community workers is related to ensuring the people's well-being, maintaining social stability and order, and consolidating the Party's long-term governance foundation. It is of great significance to the modernization of the grassroots governance system and governance capabilities. However, at present, community workers generally face issues such as the uncoordinated distribution of responsibilities and resources, and estrangement from residents in community governance work [2]. These issues reduce the professional identity of community workers, thereby affecting the overall professional and occupational development of the team.

This study, based on Grounded Theory, conducts a four-level coding of literature, online news, and interview materials [3], to inductively summarize the specific manifestations of the professional dilemmas of community workers. It analyzes the formation mechanisms of these dilemmas according to their classification and finally summarizes the research results, attempting to propose targeted suggestions and prospects. This aims to enhance the role of community workers in improving grassroots community governance and further promote good governance in the context of Chinese modernization.

2. Exploration of the Characteristic Structure of Community Workers' Professional Dilemmas

2.1. Research Design

2.1.1. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research method based on Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory is an inductive methodology that builds substantive theory from the ground up. It advocates for identifying core concepts that reflect social phenomena through systematic collection and analysis of raw data, and then constructing relevant social theories through the interconnections of these concepts [3]. This research method, which continuously codes, refines, and categorizes from raw data to establish categories, aligns with the exploration of community workers' professional dilemmas in this study. It is conducive to better dissecting the complex influencing factors behind the professional dilemmas of community workers and proposing improvement strategies [4].

2.1.2. Research Sample

In line with the actual situation in City Y, this study defines community workers as full-time dedicated staff engaged in community party building, governance, and service work, including members of community party organizations and other dedicated staff.

Based on literature analysis, this study compiled an interview outline and conducted face-to-face and online interviews with community workers and street office staff in City Y, Shandong Province, China, as the research sample. Using methods such as purposive sampling, voluntary sampling, and snowball sampling, 20 interviewees were identified to understand their views on their professional situation and suggestions for alleviating professional dilemmas.

To collect authentic and effective data, the study asked the interviewees to honestly describe their feelings and observations. The researchers declared a neutral stance and the principle of confidentiality before the interviews. With the consent of the interviewees, the entire interview process was recorded, with an average interview time of about 1.5 hours, totaling approximately 1500 minutes, and the study organized 170,000 words of interview transcripts.

2.1.3. Preliminary Theory Construction

Adhering to the principles of continuous comparison and iteration inherent in Constructivist Grounded Theory, this study compares the core categories of the professional dilemmas faced by community workers with previous research and initial data to determine if the preliminary theory is saturated. Based on the clarification of its connotations and manifestations, a model of the mechanisms behind their formation has been further constructed.

2.2. Research Process

2.2.1. Data Collection

In the early stages of this study, a comprehensive review of relevant literature, policies, online news, and comments was conducted to analyze and synthesize the understanding and research findings on the issues faced by grassroots workers both domestically and internationally.

To verify data saturation and enhance the validity of the data, the researchers conducted individual interviews from 2023 to 2024 with 13 community workers and 7 street office directors, discussing their daily work routines, and validated secondary data through on-site interviews, keeping two sets of interview records. "Triangulation" was employed to compare different individual data obtained from various sources to ensure the highest degree of authenticity in the data, continuing until no new characteristics related to professional dilemmas were identified. Moreover, no new concepts or categories emerged from the reserved interview records and online comments, confirming the data saturation as effective.

During the data collection process, the researchers coded the literature source data as A, interview data as B, online comment data as C, and press release data as D.

2.2.2. Data Analysis

The study utilized the NVivo platform for the four-level coding of materials collected through interviews and literature review, supplemented by the Excel platform for organizing materials, to summarize the different dimensions and indicators of the manifestations of community workers' professional dilemmas. The triangulation method was also combined to enhance the study's reliability and validity.

Firstly, the content from literature sources, original interviews, online comments, and press releases was individually analyzed to form itemized data for initial coding, resulting in a total of 575 items. Some examples of initial coding of data are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Partial Initial Coding of Community Workers' Professional Dilemmas Features

Source	Code	Content
Literature	A1	According to top-level design, many issues that communities cannot resolve are still assigned to them.
	A67	The community has a small workforce but undertakes a lot of work.
	...	...
	A97	In response to the "separation of residence and community" policy, the community workstation functions and then separates.
Interview	B3	Community workers receive about 50,000 RMB at the end of the year.

Table 1: (continued).

Source	Code	Content
	B98	The uncertainty of the year-end bonus for community workers in the high-tech zone is high.
	B295	The trend of community work and youthfulness brings the disadvantage of high mobility.
	B368	Annual assessments mainly involve random checks of public satisfaction to evaluate the community situation, without a clear individual assessment.
	B383	New issues of varying sizes arise in the community every day.
	...	...
	B412	Currently, the administrative work in the community is in a situation of "only looking at quantity, not quality".
Online Comments	C2	Earning less than three thousand in salary, living a "996" lifestyle, and facing the possibility of unemployment at any time.
	C17	Poor benefits and treatment, not protected by labor law, and unable to retire from the unit.
	...	...
	C29	A minority of residents lack respect for community workers and make unreasonable demands.
News	D2	During the epidemic, community workers worked day and night on epidemic prevention and control, not returning home for nearly a month.
	...	...
	D10	After extensive research by the Municipal Party Committee Organization Department, it was decided to cooperate with School X to establish a municipal teaching point to provide academic promotion training for all students from the 2018 level and every year thereafter, with the aim of improving the abilities and qualities of grassroots cadres.

Secondly, the researchers focused on the main themes, merged, refined, and conceptualized the initial coding data. After removing 58 entries that did not meet the criteria, they consolidated synonymous entries into 20. Following expert review and preliminary conceptualization, and referring to the research methods of Cao Yuankun and others [5], entries with a frequency of less than twice were excluded. Ultimately, only 18 entries passed the consistent review and formed conceptualized focused coding.

Thirdly, after focused coding, this study will further conduct axial coding, taking high-frequency entries as core categories, and classify and name other entries to clarify the categories. Based on the interpretation of the characteristics of community workers' professional dilemmas, without prior communication, researchers categorized and named the 18 entries according to the characteristics of constructing employee professional dilemmas and the relevant literature's interpretation of professional dilemmas. Subsequently, researchers explained their classification and naming reasons in turn, and after discussion, chose the results that were unanimously approved by the researchers. In the end, this study summarized the 18 entries into 12 categories of community workers' professional dilemmas: F1 High Workload, F5 Low Salary and Benefits, F9 Vague Role Positioning, F12 Lack of

Psychological Support, etc. This categorization of concepts and characteristics of community workers' professional dilemmas explores their structural dimensions.

Fourthly, integrate the main categories and carry out theoretical coding. By comparing and inducing the previous data, F3 "Low Public Support," and F10 "Work Affects Family Life" were categorized as "Interpersonal Dilemmas"; F1 "High Workload," F2 "Administrative Work Methods," F6 "High Work Requirements," F8 "Lack of Resources," F9 "Vague Role Positioning," and F11 "Immature Internal and External Mechanisms" were categorized as "Work Burnout Dilemmas"; F4 "Limited Promotion Space" and F5 "Low Salary and Benefits" were categorized as "Future Development Dilemmas"; F7 "High Psychological Pressure" and F12 "Lack of Psychological Support" were categorized as "Psychological Barrier Dilemmas."

Table 2: Focused Coding, Axial Coding, and Theoretical Coding of the Professional Dilemmas Characteristics of Community Workers

Focused Coding	Axial Coding	Theoretical Coding
E1 Low salary and benefits.	F1 High workload	G1　　　Interpersonal Dilemmas
E2 Responsibility is pushed down, high pressure.	F2　Bureaucratic　work methods	G2　Work　Burnout Dilemmas
E3 The role of community workers is not clearly defined.	F3 Low public support	G3　　　　Future Development Dilemmas
E4 High demands for professionalism and identity.	F4　Limited　career promotion opportunities	G4　　Psychological Barriers Dilemmas
E5 The government imposes a heavy load of formal work on communities.	F5 Low salary and benefits	
E6 New media brings pressure to community workers.	F6 High work demands	
E7 Lack of sound supervision and incentive mechanisms.	F7　High　psychological pressure	
E8 Scarcity of resources.	F8 Scarcity of resources	
E9 Misunderstandings from residents.	F9 Vague role positioning	
E10 Have not emerged from the shadow of the epidemic.	F10 Work affecting family life	
E11 Unable to develop other skills, narrow development space.	F11 Immature internal and external mechanisms	
E12 Few community workers, high workload.	F12 Lack of psychological support	
E13 No boundaries between work and life, causing family misunderstandings		
E14 Work content is complex, with serious bureaucracy.		
E15 Lack of legal protection, no real power.		
E16　Complex　internal　community environment.		
E17 Psychological barriers		

2.3. Research Results and Discussion

2.3.1. Connotation and Dimensions of the Professional Dilemmas of Community Workers

This study, based on a four-level coding analysis of the original data, reveals 12 core characteristics of the professional dilemmas faced by community workers, specifically analyzed as follows:

F1 High Workload. Refers to the handling of a multitude of affairs, which makes it impossible to refine some tasks.

F2 Bureaucratization of Work Methods. Community workers are managed with administrative means in professional and technical fields, bearing superior administrative orders without actual power.

F3 Low Public Support. Residents primarily consider their own interests when facing problems, making it difficult for community workers to satisfy residents when handling their affairs.

F4 Limited Career Advancement Opportunities. Many community workers express that "community work has no future development and lacks channels for advancement."

F5 Low Salary and Benefits. Working overtime without overtime pay or compensatory time off, with relatively low wages.

F6 High Work Requirements. There is a high demand for the comprehensive quality of community workers. For some positions, the political status must be a party member.

F7 High Psychological Pressure. Community workers face various assessments, and online platforms increase exposure rates, causing certain psychological pressures on community workers.

F8 Scarcity of Resources. Insufficient funding and venue support from higher authorities.

F9 Vague Role Positioning. Overlap of work between communities, governments, and property management increases the burden on community workers.

F10 Limited Leisure Time. Most community workers indicate that they have no rest on weekends, work overtime late into the night, sometimes receive temporary assignments from superiors, and their family life is disrupted.

F11 Immature Internal and External Mechanisms. Internally, this includes requirements and task allocation for community workers; externally, it includes imperfect supervision and incentive mechanisms for community workers, and a lack of legal protection.

F12 Lack of Psychological Support. The narrow space for promotion, coupled with residents' misunderstanding of the work, may cause community workers to lose their belief in serving the people.

After categorizing and summarizing the above core characteristics, this paper interprets the professional dilemmas of community workers in four aspects: interpersonal relationships, work burnout, future development, and psychological barriers.

2.3.2. Mechanism of Formation of Professional Dilemmas for Community Workers

It is believed that when individuals in society are not understood or when interpersonal relationships at work are not harmonious, people tend to lose enthusiasm for their work, leading to professional dilemmas. This study employs qualitative research methods, going through three major steps of data collection, analysis, and summarization to identify the four major dilemmas in their career development. At the same time, based on the field of organizational behavior and building upon the S(stimulus)-O(organism)-R(response) model of general human behavior proposed by behavioral psychologist John B. Watson [6], a model for the mechanism of formation of professional dilemmas for community workers has been constructed, as shown in Figure 1 [7].
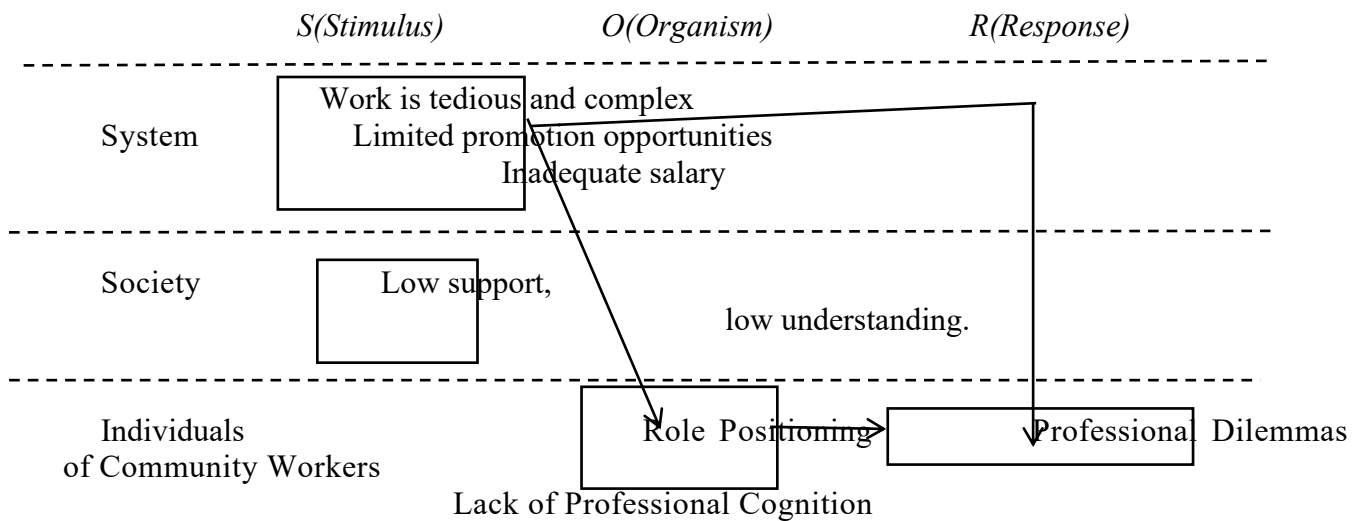
Figure 1: The Mechanism of Formation of Professional Dilemmas for Community Workers

Firstly, in terms of systems, the complexity of work is the premise for the emergence of work dilemmas for community workers. The unique nature of community work determines that community workers have irregular working hours, need to respond to emergencies or work overtime, which significantly reduces their personal disposable time. This leads to insufficient time to accompany family members and for personal study, which can easily cause friction with family and a low mood at work. Faced with high-pressure work and tight working hours, community workers inevitably experience significant psychological stress, leading to psychological barriers and dilemmas. This causes community workers to feel confused and uneasy about their profession, deepening their professional dilemmas.

Moreover, the lack of inherent development in the profession promotes the manifestation of their professional dilemmas. In terms of regulations, although there are promotion systems with three positions and eighteen levels for community workers, as well as policies for recruiting (hiring) civil servants and public institution staff from outstanding community workers, in reality, there is a situation where promotion opportunities are rare and promotion space is limited. In terms of ability, community workers, due to the complexity of work, lack personal development time, leading to slow improvement in their professional skills. The low salary and insufficient motivation for community workers result in a negative attitude towards the future, low work morale, low attractiveness of the profession, and the manifestation of future development dilemmas.

Secondly, low social recognition is the background for the emergence of professional dilemmas for community workers. The public's cognition of the scope of responsibilities of community workers is vague, and community workers may be required to over-fulfill their duties in actual work, and are even subject to criticism, making it difficult for them to carry out their work smoothly. This may cause a weakening of community workers' belief in serving the people. In addition, factors such as the difficulty in advancing community work, incomplete guarantee mechanisms, and limited available work resources can all lead to low achievement and low identity recognition among community workers, ultimately reflecting as interpersonal dilemmas in their work.

Thirdly, the different self-role positioning of community workers directly triggers the occurrence of their work dilemmas. Through grounded theory research, it is found that according to different role positionings, community workers can be divided into five types: the backbone force type, the transitional type, the stable type, the rotten type, and the experiential type. Among them, the transitional type regards the profession of community workers as a temporary stepping stone for their

own career development, making it impossible for them to devote themselves wholeheartedly to community work, lacking enthusiasm and initiative; while the rotten type holds a "rotten" mentality at work, disregarding work, only satisfying with the formal completion of the assigned work, perfunctory, with a high turnover rate. These two types of community workers with different role positionings have a weak subjective drive for work, are prone to feelings of weariness and resistance, and are very likely to fall into work burnout.

3. Conclusion

This paper, grounded in grounded theory, has conducted a detailed survey and profound analysis of the professional dilemmas faced by community workers. Due to the diverse manifestations of these dilemmas, this paper specifically categorizes them into four dimensions: interpersonal relationships, work burnout, future development, and psychological barriers. The study proposes a mechanism model for the emergence of professional dilemmas for community workers, which mainly involves systemic regulations, social support and understanding, and the individual role positioning and professional cognition of community workers. Based on the above conclusions, this paper puts forward suggestions for multiple stakeholders to alleviate the professional dilemmas of community workers.

3.1. The government should promote the construction of the system

In response to the issue of various departments pushing down work tasks to the community and setting overly complicated and strict work assessments, the government urgently needs to strengthen top-level design and promote systemic guidance. To improve the professional system for community workers, on the one hand, it is necessary to clarify professional standards, unify the professional identity and positioning of community workers, and fully detail, quantify, and standardize matters such as the selection, allocation, management, compensation, performance assessment, and training of community workers [8]; on the other hand, efforts should be increased to implement the promotion of community workers' professional levels, improve the talent mobility mechanism between community workers and civil servants, and public institution positions, focus on promoting policies for discovering and training outstanding community secretaries in community governance work, expand the number of people selected for recruitment and selection policies, and smooth the professional development channels for community workers, enhance the motivation of community workers, thereby effectively alleviating the work burnout and future development dilemmas faced by community workers.

3.2. The community atmosphere should enhance humanistic care

This study found that most community workers exhibit negative emotions such as unease, helplessness, and irritability due to work pressure in the community. Humanistic care in the community is conducive to the stability and sustainable development of the team of community workers. The community needs to strengthen humanistic care in both material and spiritual terms: promptly improve office facilities, arrange reasonable work distribution, and regulate overtime hours; pay attention to the mental health of community workers, invite professionals to provide them with psychological counseling and guidance, guide them to establish a positive and healthy role identity, and pay attention to shaping a bright and friendly community interpersonal relationship, thereby enhancing the sense of identification and belonging of community workers and alleviating their interpersonal and psychological barriers.

3.3. Community organization construction should be committed to specialization

In response to the low level of professionalization of the community workers' team found in this study, community workers need to actively respond to in-depth training reform policies and actively improve their professional level. Community organization construction should put the training and training of community workers in the first place, explore the development of professional and practical education and training, and establish and improve a community worker training system that integrates entry training, annual rotation training, special training, and practical training; in addition, more emphasis should be placed on training "general social workers" - around the needs of community governance, establish a "general social worker" knowledge base, carry out "general social worker" business training, qualification certification, and implement dynamic management. Thereby improving the professional level of the community workers' team and stimulating the internal motivation for community workers to resolve professional dilemmas in various dimensions.

3.4. Society should strengthen external recognition

In response to the issue of low social recognition and understanding, grassroots work in communities should pay attention to the intensity and diversity of publicity, comprehensively use various media forms such as the Internet and television to introduce the important significance of community work and community workers to economic and social development, report the touching deeds of advanced community workers, and widely publicize the important role of community workers in the development of the socialist new era, thereby enhancing the external recognition of the community workers' profession by the public. At the same time, all parties should participate in coordination, engage in equal dialogue, stimulate the enthusiasm of community workers, and create a harmonious social situation [8], starting from grassroots governance to further improve the level of social governance, and promote the formation of a good, harmonious, and rapid development trend in society [9], helping social workers to alleviate their professional dilemmas.

Chen Yixin, Fu Meihui: Chen Yixin was responsible for writing the interview outline, conducting interviews, and conducting preliminary coding and writing suggestions; Fu Meihui was responsible for writing the research background, analyzing the manifestations and mechanisms of dilemmas. Both are responsible for data organization and analysis.
Both contributed equally.

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