A Study on the Structural Dimension of Middle Class Relational Identification in Chinese Context

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Abstract: Through in-depth interviews, this study makes an exploratory study on the dimension of the middle class relational identification in Chinese context by using the grounded theory. It is mainly composed of 4 dimensions: relational orientation, relational adaptation, relational evaluation and relational development. According to the four dimension model of middle class relational identification, the middle class relational identification in China is the cognitive and behavioral orientation that in the action of achieving a certain purpose, because of the perception of consistence with each other in role cognition and personal cognition, the middle class is willing to unite and trust, respect and understand and coordinate the conflict to adapt to this relationship, and then to form a positive evaluation of the relationship and a sense of belonging and commitment to this relationship. The construction of the structural dimension of middle class relational identification in China is conducive to explaining the endemic phenomena of Chinese middle class.

1. Introduction

In the process of modernization around the world, the rise and growth of the middle class is a universal phenomenon, as is the case in China. There are great differences in the composition of the middle class in China. If cultural factors such as identity and consciousness are ignored, middle class research will encounter many unanswerable questions [1]. The concept of identification originates from sociology, relationship identification is a kind of identification related to interpersonal relationship. Because of the great differences in the composition of the middle class in Chinese context, they can only obtain the identification within the class from a narrower perspective, such as the common consumption characteristics [2], the dual relationship in the workplace [3], etc. In addition, the function of the family to determine the class boundary in Chinese society is prominent, and the fuzzy boundary of the middle class has been transformed into a clear and internal family boundary [4], the relational identification will be a feasible perspective to explain the phenomenon of middle class in China. The theoretical construction and empirical research of relational identification is still quite lacking in China. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the nature of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context, develop dimensions and measurement scales of relational identification covering multiple role relationships, so as to unify the structure and measurement of relational identification. This study will explore the dimensions of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context, and understand its connotation, in order to provide a feasible research perspective to explain the unique phenomenon of Chinese middle class.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept and Characteristics of Relational Identification

The definition of relational identification in academic circles has two perspectives: state view and process view [5]. From the perspective of state view, it emphasizes the cognitive relationship between the actor and the role relationship, and then determines the dynamic response of the actor to a certain relationship [6] [7]. What's different is that Sluss and Ashforth [6] emphasize the basic role of individual characteristics in relational identification, while Wang [7] emphasizes that individuals regard others as a means to realize their own values or interests. From the perspective of process

view, it describes the process in which an individual obtains self-construction from the role relationship. Process view can explain the formation and change of relationship operation [5]. The state view of relational identification is closely related to the process view. Various factors that affect the relationship affect the process of relational identification, which will change the state of relational identification at a certain point.

2.2 Dimension of Relational Identification

Scholars at home and abroad have not reached a consensus on the connotation of relational identification. Is relational identification a multi-dimensional construct or a single dimensional construct? If it is a multidimensional construct, which dimensions should be included? What is the relationship between dimensions? How to operate the concept? So far, there is a lack of relevant research at home and abroad.

Foreign scholars mostly study three directions from the perspective of ordinary organization members: "subordinates' role identification with leaders, employees' role identification with colleagues, employees' role identification with external stakeholders of the organization". In China, there are "ten-identifications" in relational identification [8], and kinship identification is the core of Chinese relational identification. The life style of the middle class involves many aspects such as family, work, study and interest, and its role relationship inevitably presents diversity. Therefore, in addition to the cultural differences between the East and the West, it is necessary to deeply understand the connotation of the relational identification of the middle class in Chinese context, understand its dimension structure.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Method

In order to understand the connotation and dimensions of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context, this study mainly uses qualitative research methods. In the process of the research, the open questionnaire method, in-depth interview method and grounded theory method are used to obtain and analyze the data, and then refine the structural dimension and clarify its connotation.

3.2 Data Sources

The commonly used standard of stratum division is the comprehensive use of income, education and vocational indicators [9]. Based on this criterion, the study defines the education standard as junior college or above, the occupational middle class as those who always or often need rapid thinking and mental work in their work, and the income standard as individuals with an annual income of more than 20000 yuan [10]. The individuals who meet these three indicators and any two indicators are defined as middle class. Based on this standard, 21 middle-class people who work and live in Shanghai are selected as samples.

3.3 Information Acquisition

In this study, in-depth interviews were used to collect the required information. The whole interview was recorded. After the interview, the recordings were sorted word by word, and nearly 50000 words of interview records were obtained. The interview content includes: the interviewees introduce their basic information, the interviewees give examples of an identified relationship and a non- identified relationship respectively. Twenty one interviewees provided 42 relationship cases, which basically involved the work, study, family and hobbies of the middle class.

3.4 Reliability and Validity Test

In this study, we use grounded theory to analyze data and strictly abide by Strauss and Corbin's procedural coding process and method [11]. In the process of research, the coding team members carry out data labeling and coding together. When there are different opinions, they discuss each other until they agree.

4. Category Extraction and Model Construction

4.1 Coding Analysis of Grounded Theory

According to the grounded theory coding process of Strauss and Corbin [11], this study analyzes the interview data in three steps: open coding, relational coding and core coding.

Through the open coding, 127 original statements are extracted and 39 free nodes are formed after conceptualization. In categorization, the initial concept with less frequency is eliminated and 21 free nodes are finally established.

Relational coding is the process of discovering and establishing the relationship between categories. According to the free nodes obtained from the initial conceptualization, this study concludes eight categories: individual cognition, role cognition, solidarity and trust, respect and understanding, coordinating conflicts, relationship self-evaluation, relationship social evaluation and relationship outlook.

In the core coding stage, according to the eight categories from the relational coding stage, four core categories are further summarized: relational orientation, relational adaptation, relational evaluation and relational development. See Table 1 for the specific corresponding relationship.

Table 1 Core Code

Tree Node (Categorization)	Core Code
Individual Cognition	Relational Orientation
Role Cognition	
Solidarity and Trust	Relational Adaptation
Respect and Understanding	
Coordinating conflicts	
Relationship Self-evaluation	Relational Evaluation
Relationship Social Evaluation	
Relationship Outlook	Relational Development

4.2 Dimension Model and Connotation Definition of Relational Identification

In the structural dimension model of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context relationship, the four dimensions of relational orientation, relational adaptation, relational evaluation and relational development are the core categories, which affect the relational identification of middle class. According to the model, this study holds that relational identification of Chinese middle class is the middle class's cognitive and behavioral orientation in realizing a purposeful action, because the actor perceives the consistency of role cognition and personal cognition with the relationship partner, and is willing to adapt to the relationship through solidarity and trust, respect and understanding, and coordinating conflicts, and then form a positive evaluation of the relationship, as well as a sense of belonging and commitment to the relationship.

5. Document Dialogue

Based on in-depth interview and grounded theory, this study abstracts four structural dimensions of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context, and finds that these four structural dimensions have solid theoretical basis through dialogues with existing domestic and foreign studies.

The dimension of relational orientation includes two sub dimensions: individual cognition and role cognition. According to Sluss and Ashforth [6], relational identification is based on relationship identity, which includes role-based identity and personal identity. At the sub dimension level of individual cognition, narrative psychology based on the concept of "narrative" focuses on how people organize behaviors and give meaning through narrating life stories, and how to construct themselves in this process. Relational identification has personality characteristics. When one identifies a relationship, the characteristics and personality of the other will be fully considered [6].

At the sub dimension level of role cognition, according to the symbolic interaction theory, the individual's self-role is formed in the social interaction with others and changes with time [12]. In the context of Chinese culture, Chinese people will use different exchange rules because of different relationship attributes, that is, the exchange principle between family members is responsibility and obligation, the exchange principle between relatives and friends is reciprocity, and the exchange principle between strangers adopts the instrumental principle [13]. The essence of the pattern of differential order relationship in Chinese society is the response of Chinese people to the cognition of role relationship.

The dimension of relational adaptation includes three sub dimensions: solidarity and trust, respect and understanding, and coordinating conflicts. The relational identification takes the relational attribute as the standard of identification, emphasizes to abide by the behavior norm under a certain relationship attribute, and both parties of the relationship must bear the responsibilities and obligations in the relationship [13]. For example, Chinese society requires children to be "filial" to their parents, which actually requires their children to respect and obey their parents. The sub dimension of solidarity and trust and the sub dimension of conflict and coordination belong to the category of relationship norms, which reflect the common understanding and expectation of both parties and can build and create a harmonious relationship atmosphere [14]. Social exchange theory describes the individual's perception of the exchange relationship with each other, and emphasizes the comparison between their own exchange relationship and other members' exchange relationship. In general, the parties to the relationship need to prove their mutual loyalty (i.e., unity), a common interest relationship (i.e., reciprocity), willingness to assume multiple responsibilities (i.e., integrity of roles), belief adjustment (i.e., flexibility), and a tendency to resolve conflicts harmoniously (i.e., coordinate conflicts) [15]. At the sub dimension level of respect and understanding, social support theory can explain that one's relational identification with the other is an indicator of obtaining social support from the other. To respect and understand each other means to give each other face, to recognize the social status or reputation of the other [16], and to obtain social support from the other.

The dimension of relational evaluation includes two sub dimensions: relationship self-evaluation and relationship social evaluation. At the sub dimension level of relationship self-evaluation, when one provides enough social support and meets the emotional and instrumental needs of the other, the other can positively evaluate the role relationship and form relational identification [17]. Relational identification has the characteristics of interpersonal attraction and role sublimation [6]. When both sides of the relationship agree with the relationship, friendship may be formed beyond the boundaries of formal roles. In China, the intensity of emotional relationship among family members, relatives and friends, and between strangers decreases in turn. According to the resource allocation model of Hwang[18], the possibility of resource allocators accepting resource allocation requests is a function of the closeness of the relationship between allocators and applicants, and the latter is a function of emotional level, reciprocity (human feelings), and "face" to applicants in turn. In addition, social learning theory holds that a good relationship can make one party of the relationship become a model and encourage the other party to actively imitate it, so that both parties can internalize the nature and characteristics of the relationship and improve the relational identification [19]. On the sub dimension level of relationship social evaluation, generally speaking, the more a group of related role relationships are recognized by the collective, the stronger the recognition of both parties to their roles will be. Collective recognition can come from other individuals or from a broader social background [12].

The dimension of relational development includes a sub dimension of relationship outlook. According to the theory of self-narration, in the process of constructing the relational identification, the relational identification can be seen as one of the parties who narrates by connecting the past and the present experiences. Relational identification is not only a state, but also a process of change. Relational identification from the perspective of process view can explain the formation and change of relational identification [5]. Therefore, relational identification is developed after a certain point of time. Whether and how to extend and change in the future also needs attention.

6. Conclusion and Agenda

6.1 Main Contributions

First of all, this study clarifies the connotation of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context. Relational identification of middle class in Chinese context is the middle class's cognitive and behavioral orientation in realizing a purposeful action, because the actor perceives the consistency of role cognition and personal cognition with the relationship partner, and is willing to adapt to the relationship through solidarity and trust, respect and understanding, and coordinating conflicts, and then form a positive evaluation of the relationship, as well as a sense of belonging and commitment to the relationship.

Secondly, it constructs the structural dimension model of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context. In this model, relational orientation, relational adaptation, relational evaluation and relational development are the 4 core dimensions. These 4 core dimensions affect the relational identification of middle class.

6.2 Shortcomings of This Study

First of all, all the interviewees come from the same city. They work, study and live in the same city in China. Therefore, whether the research on the structural dimension of relational identification of middle class has universal significance is still uncertain. In the future, we need to expand the regional coverage of the samples to improve the generality of the research conclusions.

Secondly, this study lacks of quantitative research. This study mainly uses qualitative research methods. Therefore, the research conclusion lacks the support of quantitative data and quantitative research.

6.3 Future Research Prospects

The future research can be improved in two aspects: first, to develop the measurement scale of structural dimensions of relational identification of middle class in Chinese context to provide operable technical basis for the follow-up empirical research; second, to expand to the fields of consumer behavior, consumer sociology, consumer economics, organizational behavior, psychology and other disciplines, further excavate its antecedent and outcome variables, explore the relationship between relational identification and other variables, and pay special attention to its possible negative impact.

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