

Comparison and Analysis of the Sense of Social Belonging of Group and Individual Casual Laborers in China

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Abstract:

Currently, a lower sense of social belonging has become a common problem faced by China's casual labor groups, which has impacted their mental health and social integration. This study aims to explore whether the collective strength of casual work is one of the factors affecting the sense of social belonging, analyze the possible reasons behind it, and propose feasible optimization suggestions based on the findings. This study conducts semi-structured interviews with two groups of casual workers separately: those engaged in collective labor and those working individually. By comparing the sense of social belonging exhibited by the two groups and analyze the causes, it was found that group casual laborers possessed a higher sense of social belonging compared to individual casual laborers, and that enhancing the collectivity of casual labors is one way to enhance the sense of social belonging of the casual laborers group. The study offers evidence as well as suggestions for enhancing the well-being of the casual laborers.

Keywords: Casual work; Collectivity; Social belonging; Group casual laborers; Individual casual laborers.

1. Introduction

1.1 . Research Background and Topic

Along with the occurrence of new industry and the trend of digital economic development, the number of casual laborers in China increases. By 2023, China's flexibly employed population reached 200 million, accounting for 14.3% of the country's employed population [1]. Of these, 175 million were platform-based casual jobs [2]. However, the average monthly income of this large group is only 6,198

yuan [2], and the problem of their social belonging is getting public's attention. Because of the lack of protection of the employment platforms in casual laborers' rights and interests, and society's discrimination against casual laborers, many of them are facing the problem of no social security, an inability to sense self-value, and long working hours with unstable pay [3]. These problems have led to the low sense of social belonging of casual laborers in China. Actions to safeguard China's casual laborers' well-being are urgent. This study discovers the differences of social belongings between group casual laborers and indi-

vidual casual laborers through interviews and discusses reasons causing the differences.

1.2 . Research Aims and Research Significance

This study tries to point out problems in the existing casual labor industry in China as reflected in the interviews, figure out the causes of research results and make recommendations for optimization recommendations on improving the social belonging of the casual laborers in China. Examining these issues can help promote policy improvements, reduce social inequalities and maintain social stability.

1.3 . Research Method and Research Structure

This research takes the form of interviews, and interviews three delivery riders who can represent group casual laborers and an hourly domestic worker who can represent individual casual laborers. The study first summarizes and comments on existing relevant literature, then introduces the detailed research method of the interviews and analysis the interviews, subsequently, discusses the possible causes of the result and gives recommendations, finally, draws conclusions of the holistic study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 . Summar of Existing Studies

Based on existing studies of casual laborers in China, most of the casual laborers suffer from occupational discrimination and labor rights violations. By 2025, the delivery riders, as one of the most common casual labors in China, have expanded to over 10 million [4]. However, approximately 65% of delivery riders in China believe they suffer prejudice from the society [5]. According to the “Intermediary mechanisms”, these occupational factors decrease the level of community integration (manifestations: lack of social connections to meet intimacy and socialization needs, etc. [6]) of casual laborers, thus, exacerbate the level of loneliness and increase the risk of mental illness [7]. Therefore, by solving the problem of occupational discrimination and protection of labor rights or by increasing the social belongings of casual laborers can relieve loneliness and enhance the well-beings of casual laborers.

2.2 . Research Definition and Scope

The study only focusses on the dimension of social belongings, other factors such as economic security and work autonomy are excluded. The concrete expressions of social belonging commonly include feeling of being respected by the platform and the client or mutual support among colleagues.

The study defines two types of casual work - group casual work and individual casual work. Group casual laborers refer to a type of casual work that is characterized by strong connectivity between casual workers, either working together throughout the day or building online and offline communities to help each other or provide emotional value (e.g., food delivery riders, migrant workers). Individual casual laborers are another type of casual work that workers tend to work individually, without any forms of communities (e.g., hourly domestic workers)

2.1 . Research Gaps

Most of the existing studies focus on finding methods to improve society’s acceptance on casual laborers and protect their legal rights [8-10]. However, this is limiting in terms of enhancing the well-being of casual laborers. In-depth interviews were conducted with casual laborers of both types of work separately, and optimization suggestions to enhance the well-being of casual laborers to reduce mental risks were derived by comparing their sense of social belongings.

3. Method and Analysis

3.1 . Research Method

This study takes the form of semi-structured interviews to explore the sense of social belongings of group and individual casual laborers in China. This form has a framing of questions but is more flexible compared to structured interviews, which is suitable for in-depth exploration of problems. The interviews are designed under a general topic of their mental health and stress, as well as their sense of belonging in the society. This study interviews three delivery riders, their answers can reflect the social belonging of group casual laborers to a certain extent. The study also interviews an hourly domestic worker, whose answer reflects the social belonging of group casual laborers. In order to protect the privacy of interviewees, the study uses numbers instead of real names, and they are named as delivery rider A, delivery rider B, delivery rider C and hourly domestic laborer D.

3.2 . Analysis

3.2.1 . Interview Analysis of Group Casual Laborers (Three Delivery Riders).

This study takes the example of three delivery laborers (delivery rider A, delivery rider B Analysis and delivery rider C) in Beijing, China. They all currently work under Meituan, a takeaway company in China that dominates the food delivery industry. The main delivery area for these delivery riders is located in Zhongguancun, Haidian

District. This geopolitical relationship is created for them to build a deeper connection to be group casual laborers. Moreover, they are all from the same hometown, Shanxi, China, according to “the common in-group identity model”, by emphasizing shared identity, cooperation and positive attitudes can be more easily promoted [11].

Based on the interviews of three delivery riders, this study summarizes three main factors that influences the social belongings. First, the Fatigue monitoring system. Delivery rider A claims that the fatigue monitoring system of the platform requests workers to be online no more than 12 hours a day. Delivery rider A says: “Although seemingly the platform protects workers’ health, most workers still complain that the system isn’t flexible enough and brings even more anxiety to the workers.” Second, A mentions the Automated Dispatch System (ADS) will prioritize orders to higher-ranking riders automatically. The lack of insurance is also a huge problem for them. Three riders all mention that there is not any forms of welfare and comprehensive insurance system. Delivery rider B says: “You will deduct 2.50 yuan for self-insurance for the first order you take online each day. This is the only insurance available.” However, delivery rider C states that due to bad weather and delivery deadlines, traffic accidents happen frequently but are not insured by the platform. Third, the platform requests riders to work for at least 8 hours a day, so it is difficult to take leave. When the rider A first came to Beijing, he was faced with the problems of looking at houses, buying houses and renovating them, which took a lot of time. “Due to the excessive time off, I had to quit my job during that time and re-register my account when I was done, which was especially troublesome, and I wouldn’t have any income during that period of time” (delivery rider A).

Since the delivery service is carried out at the same station, and the three of them found each other as hometowns, they easily get acquainted and had a small online community through WeChat group chats. They all say that the establishment of this community has soothed the anxiety and distress caused by their work and feel their “presence”. Delivery rider C says: “B worked here the longest and gave me a lot of advice when I first got here. For example, I was short of money but couldn’t deliver for long periods of time due to the fatigue monitoring system, and he told me that a lot of people work on several platforms at the same time, and when their time is up on one, they switch to another.” Delivery rider A says: “Every time we feel the unfairness of the platform or encounter difficult customers, we will “spit” in the group chat, although it doesn’t change anything, we feel much more comfortable!”

3.2.2 . Interview Analysis of individual casual laborer (a Hourly Domestic Laborer).

This study takes the example of one hourly domestic laborer, D, in Beijing, China. She is currently working under Tianedaojia, one of the largest companies in the area of domestic cleaning. According to D’s description, she signed a written contract with the company when she joined the company, and the company will have free online training classes. After attending the training classes, she can take exams and get professional certificates, do more advanced work, and earn more. In general, she is satisfied with the company, the only problem is the lack of insurance.

D has been working for this company for over ten years; her main scope of work is cleaning and cooking for clients in their houses. However, in the middle of these ten years of work, the elderly in her family got sick and she needed to go back to her hometown, Gansu, to help take care of the elderly. She says: “I had no income in my hometown, so I went back to Beijing to continue to earn money, but these expenses can only maintain a basic life.” Although she only works for 9 hours a day in average and the platform is more humanized compared with the three delivery riders, the answer from D makes the author feel more stressful and depressed. The main reason that causes unhappiness and low social belonging for D is the loneliness that comes from not having friends and colleagues. “I live by myself in Beijing, I have to go to three or four customers’ homes every day to do work. I sometimes feel that life and work are too strongly intertwined, and it’s awkward but I can’t help it. It might be better to talk about it with someone, but I don’t know who to talk to. I rarely have time to go out and I don’t have the opportunity to make friends, the main way for me to relax is to listen to music or watch short videos”, she says. Thankfully, she mentioned several times through the interview that the customers she worked with were very understanding and did not make her feel any discomfort.

4. Discussion

4.1 . Causes of Results

According to the answers from interviewees, the three delivery workers show a stronger sense of social belongings compare to the hourly domestic laborer, although they are subjected to more unfair treatment from companies and discrimination from society. The result can be attributed to the high degree of group connectivity demonstrated by the casual labor sector of food delivery industry. Three interrelated factors may account for how the collectiveness affects casual laborers’ sense of social belongings.

First, the working environment compels a social opportunity. “Compulsory” implies that workers do not choose to socialize voluntarily, but that the nature of the platform or work compels them to interact. Such socialization is not

“optional” but necessary for survival. According to the “third space” theory, some informal social situations can make people feel joyful, warm and even become spiritual supports. Delivery rider C’s word confirm the theory to be true - “I’m not really much of a talker, but I see the same group of people every morning, and inevitably the more outgoing ones, like A, come to talk to me and get to know each other better as we talk.” Apparently, the takeaway station has become a “third space” for the riders in Zhongguancun. Another example is that during the peak delivery period, delivery riders will wait for orders in shopping malls and other places where businesses are concentrated. Inevitably they will hit each other in the face and have to chat a few times to remain polite [12].

Second, according to Simmel in 1908, conflict will establish group boundaries [13]. Applied to the context of the takeaway delivery industry, “conflict” refers to the irrationality of the platform’s system, discrimination by others, etc., and delivery riders who face these problems together are more likely to build collectives. Simmel also mentions that in small groups, individuals are more connected, more likely to work together as equals, and more hostile to outsiders. This “common enemy”, in turn, reinforces internal solidarity. Simmel’s study matches rider A’s answer of gaining comfort by complaining about outside injustices. Lastly, the food delivery work has a high occupational identification degree. Take delivery riders under Meituan for example, riders wear yellow work clothes every day, weaving in and out of stores, roads and residential buildings. According to this study’s daily observation, there are even takeaway riders who have never met each other chatting while waiting for the traffic light together, adding contact information and establishing new social relationships as a result. This high visibility made it easier for the outworkers to identify and communicate with each other. In contrast, hourly domestic workers are not required to wear overalls. Take Tianedaojia as an example, even if the company provides them with work clothes, due to the lack of regulation and mandatory requirements, workers usually work in their own personal clothing, so identifying and further establishing a relationship is difficult for workers to achieve.

4.2 . Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the interviews, the following optimization recommendations can be made regarding collective versus individual casual laborers.

For the policymaking, policy should force platforms to safeguard the socialization of the casual workers. For example, legislation can be enacted to require platforms to set up shared rest stops, to provide resting places for casual workers while promoting socialization, especially for decentralized casual workers such as domestic workers. Moreover, the policy should encourage the establishment

of casual laborer unions and other similar organizations to provide legal advice service and opportunity for communication, which will not only promote the protection of the legitimate rights and interests of casual laborers, but also enhance their sense of belongings in society.

For the platform, first of all, it can build various forms of online and offline communities, through which it can promote the communication and interaction among the workers and enhance the degree of group connection among them. Secondly, the platform can set up a collective complaint channel, not only to allow workers to have the opportunity to protect their rights, but also to ensure the authenticity and popularity of the content of the collective response.

For the casual laborers themselves, they should proactively look for people with shared identity around them, which they can do using social apps, but they need to be careful to protect their privacy. In addition, casual workers can organize offline gatherings on their own initiative to get closer to each other through dinners and small talks, thus increase their sense of social belongings.

5. Conclusion

This study examines how casual work’s type (individual and group) influences casual workers’ social belongings in China. By semi-structured interviews with the two different types of casual workers, this study draws the conclusion that group casual laborers show a higher sense of social belongings, whereas individual workers are lonely and show a lower sense of social belongings.

While the interviews in this study covered only one representative of each of the two types of casual laborers (delivery riders and hourly domestic workers), and three people were interviewed for group casual laborers and one person was interviewed for individual casual laborers, the sample types and sizes were not sufficiently varied to allow for a comprehensive exploration of the sense of belonging of casual laborers.

Future research can jump out of the individual and group casual labor categories, refine the types of Chinese casual labor groups, and use more methods for sense of social belonging and other aspects of research. For example, future research can combine questionnaires, data analysis and different types of interviews as a way to conduct a more comprehensive and detailed study. Future research can refine the types of casual laborers, increase the sample size, and combine questionnaire surveys and other methods to conduct research. Moreover, the research direction can be deepened, for example, to explore which of the online and offline communities is more helpful in enhancing the sense of social belonging of casual laborers, and to explore the differences between different forms of socialization among casual laborers. In addition, a comparative

analysis of the social belongings of casual laborer groups in different countries can be conducted and recommendations can be made.

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