

Analysis of Participation Willingness and Influencing Factors of Rural Mutual Aid-based Elderly Care

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Abstract: Since the early 21st century, China has entered an aging society, with the degree of population aging continuing to intensify. According to the Seventh National Population Census data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, individuals aged 60 and above accounted for 21.1% of the total population, while those aged 65 and above constituted 15.4%. This demographic shift coincides with significant socio-familial changes. The legacy of the family planning policy has led to sustained fertility decline, resulting in smaller family sizes dominated by nuclear families and a rise in the prevalence of the "4-2-1" family structure (four grandparents, two parents, one child). Concurrently, increased social mobility, particularly the migration of younger labor from less developed regions to first-tier and mega-cities, has resulted in prolonged physical separation between generations. Consequently, the traditional family-based system for providing elderly care is increasingly inadequate, leading to deficits in daily living assistance, emotional support, and care during illness for older adults. Faced with this deepening population aging and the marked decline in the capacity for traditional familial eldercare, there is an urgent need for greater societal involvement in supporting the elderly population.

Keywords: Mutual Aid for Elderly Care; Elderly Care Needs; Influence Factor

1. Introduction

As a complementary approach to family-based and societal eldercare, mutual support eldercare offers a viable option for addressing the diversified needs of older adults. Against the backdrop of accelerated population aging in China, leveraging the institutional strengths inherent in the nation's development model to enhance the sustainability of mutual support

eldercare systems presents a critical research imperative.

2. Theoretical Basis

Social exchange theory, pioneered by Blau, focuses on the relationship between social structure and exchange behavior from a macro-sociological perspective. Blau posited that exchange behavior is driven by "attraction forces" and defined social exchange as "actions contingent on rewarding reactions from others, which cease when these expected reactions cease." For any social interaction to constitute exchange, Blau stipulated two necessary conditions: (1) the attainment of an actor's goal necessitates active interaction with others, and (2) the means employed must effectively facilitate goal attainment. Within macro-structural contexts, Blau argued that interpersonal relationships are often indirect, requiring shared values as mediating mechanisms and institutionalization processes for structural stabilization.

Subsequent developments have significantly extended social exchange theory. Emerson expanded its scope to encompass broader exchange networks, employing mathematical modeling and network analysis to investigate social structure, exchange motivations, and institutionalization. This line of inquiry gave rise to exchange network theory. Building on this, Willer and colleagues formulated network exchange theory, which utilizes social structure and exclusion mechanisms to explain exchange outcomes. Network exchange theory integrates analyses of actors' internal characteristics (e.g., beliefs, preferences, decisions) with their external relational and structural contexts to predict exchange results. Collectively, these advancements have deepened the theory beyond superficial interaction analysis, enabling the examination of complex, interconnected relationships that transcend immediate time and space, thereby reflecting

the intricate nature of interpersonal dynamics.

3. The Necessity of Mutual Assistance for Elderly Care in Rural Areas

Significant disparities exist in mutual support eldercare development between urban and rural China, largely attributable to divergent economic conditions. The literature consistently highlights the greater urgency and necessity of implementing such models in rural areas. Constructing a robust rural social eldercare service system is imperative to address accelerated population aging and meet the growing demand for formal support among the rural elderly. Rapid urbanization has profoundly transformed rural society, simultaneously weakening traditional familial care structures. This has resulted in widespread deficiencies among rural seniors, including insufficient emotional support, limited social participation, and inadequate daily living assistance.

While the prevailing rural eldercare provision model relies primarily on families, supplemented by governmental and market resources, its limitations are increasingly evident. In this context, mutual support eldercare emerges as a crucial approach to counterbalance the diminishing capacity of family care and to address the existing gaps and inefficiencies in formal service provision within rapidly urbanizing rural settings. As scholar He Xuefeng contends, mutual support represents a viable pathway for rural eldercare in China.

The feasibility of mutual support eldercare in rural China is underpinned by strong socio-cultural foundations. Historically, kinship-based clan organizations served as the cornerstone of mutual aid, functioning as integrated units encompassing social, economic, and welfare roles. These clans constituted one of the earliest and most enduring forms of non-state welfare provision in Chinese history. Kinship ties remain fundamental to clan identity and mutual reliance. Furthermore, deeply ingrained cultural norms, particularly filial piety (xiao) and traditions of mutual assistance (huzhu gongji), provide vital cultural legitimacy. The persistence of these values establishes a durable cultural base for contemporary initiatives.

Geographic proximity (diyuan) also facilitates implementation, as village elders typically share similar cultural backgrounds and

lifestyles. This commonality is reinforced by local governance structures, grassroots organizations like elderly associations, and established community governance logics. Collectively, kinship bonds (xueyuan), geographic proximity (diyuan), and shared cultural heritage create unique preconditions for the emergence and development of mutual support eldercare in rural China.

4. The Operational Mechanism of Mutual Assistance for Elderly Care in Rural Areas

Research on mutual support eldercare models and their operational mechanisms encompasses two primary strands. The first examines specific model archetypes. For instance, Liu Nina conceptualizes rural mutual support eldercare as a novel social care framework centered on the "self-help and mutual-help" (zizhu-huzhu) ethos and practices, mobilizing older adults to provide reciprocal care services. Time banking, another distinct model, utilizes time as a currency unit for depositing and redeeming volunteer service hours provided to others. Wang Yipeng highlights that time banking, characterized by its lower organizational costs, is emerging as a pivotal component within China's mutual support eldercare landscape.

The second strand involves comparative analyses of diverse models. Li Qiao and Sun Zenan conducted a spatial comparative analysis of three prevalent types: government-led, community-supported, and elite-facilitated mutual support eldercare. Their research further identified four practical developmental configurations: village-endogenous, hybrid endogenous-exogenous, society-assisted, and government-pushed models. Similarly, Sun Miaoqing and Wang Hongli advocated for multi-stakeholder collaborative governance, emphasizing resource integration and allocation to establish village-level mutual support systems. Complementing this, Du Peng and An Ruixia categorized rural practices based on leadership dynamics into three typologies: grassroots spontaneous initiatives, community elite-driven models, and cadre-led programs.

Existing research on mutual support eldercare draws upon diverse theoretical perspectives. Nie Jianliang et al., applying social capital theory, examined the influence of village-level social networks on rural elders' willingness to provide eldercare services. Their findings

reveal differential effects contingent upon both the type of service and the recipient, alongside significant group heterogeneity. Tie Mingtai leveraged Granovetter's strength of ties theory to conceptualize the construction of social support networks for rural mutual support eldercare.

Wang Hui integrated welfare pluralism and social systems theory to construct a framework positing four synergistic mechanisms essential for the sustainable operation of rural mutual support eldercare. Zhang Jiyuan, grounded in sequential reciprocity theory, analyzed the welfare production mechanisms within both co-located (aggregated-structure) and distributed (networked-structure) mutual support models. He demonstrated that co-located models trigger reciprocity through spatial compression, while networked models achieve it via self-organization, both generating cascading and structural reciprocity effects.

Wang Lijian, Yang Liu, and Liao Huan identified gender as a significant predictor of participation willingness. However, empirical findings diverge regarding gender-specific participation tendencies—whether male or female elders exhibit greater willingness remains contested. Gu Yonghong and Liu Yu focused on the inherent governance logic and intergenerational compensation strategies within community-based intergenerational mutual support models.

Given its emphasis on voluntary participation, collaborative action, and multi-stakeholder engagement in public service delivery, co-production theory offers a pertinent framework. Consequently, Zhao Haohua advocates for a co-production approach, proposing: (1) establishing platforms for co-creation, co-governance, and sharing (gongjian gongzhi gongxiang); (2) promoting active aging paradigms to engage elders as co-producers; and (3) developing robust legal and regulatory frameworks.

5. Research on the Development Difficulties of Rural Mutual Aid Elderly Care

Several prevalent models of mutual support eldercare exist in contemporary practice, notably Mutual Support Happiness Homes (MSHHs), Time Banking, Elderly Association-Social Organization Partnerships, and Party-Community Integration Models. MSHHs, representing the dominant rural form,

leverage geographical proximity (diyuan) and existing social networks within familiar communities to enable aging in place. Time Banking incentivizes participants to utilize available time to assist others, accumulating time credits that can be redeemed for future support services. Elderly Associations, typically organized and led by village collectives, function as mutual aid groups dedicated to safeguarding the rights and interests of older adults while enhancing their social welfare.

Empirical studies reveal significant challenges hindering the sustainable development of mutual support eldercare (MSE) in rural China. Prevalent models like Mutual Support Happiness Homes (MSHHs) often suffer from inefficient implementation, driven by motivations to fulfill administrative targets or secure subsidies rather than genuine need, leading to suboptimal operation and underutilization. MSHHs also exhibit service deficiencies stemming from unclear provider responsibility allocation, resulting in limited scope, insufficient volume, and substandard quality, exacerbated by a critical shortage of professional management and care personnel. Participant motivation presents another hurdle, with limited willingness observed among rural elders; instances of prioritizing free service acquisition over reciprocal contribution hinder sustained mutual aid. Time Banking models face challenges of inadequate public promotion, low awareness, immature operational mechanisms, and consequently low public trust. Systemic barriers further impede sustainability. Firstly, governance imbalance arises as the government's central role overshadows other societal actors, creating an imbalanced responsibility structure where insufficient participation and the precarious survival of non-governmental entities, coupled with high dependency on government support, impede effective service matching and quality provision.

Secondly, community-level disengagement is evident. Beyond governmental issues, rural communities exhibit weakened social cohesion characterized by heightened individualism, internal competition, diminished connections, and pronounced stratification, fostering alienation and eroding trust critical for MSE. Rural depopulation ("hollowing out"), driven

by livelihood transitions, leaves behind vulnerable populations (women, elderly, children), weakening traditional kinship (xueyuan) and geographic (diyuan) bonds, shifting communities towards semi-familiar societies, and dissolving the mutual aid bedrock. Furthermore, this economic stagnation burdens local welfare systems; limited fiscal capacity and low social investment motivation mean MSE infrastructure, often reliant on initial government subsidies, lacks sustained funding for long-term operation. Thirdly, infrastructure and service gaps persist in MSHHs, including inadequate facilities, insufficient healthcare-eldercare integration ("yiyang jiehe"), limited service variety, and a lack of professional staff, contributing to inadequate service quantity and quality. Fourthly, socio-cultural shifts see interpersonal relationships increasingly governed by instrumental rationality over value rationality, eroding "the foundation of spontaneous mutual aid behavior predicated on long-term trust, moral obligation, and psychological expectations". Traditional mutual aid culture acts as a moral "soft constraint," unlike legal obligations; however, self-interested behavior among elders, manifesting as a desire for "free services" without reciprocal contribution ("free-riding"), jeopardizes sustainability. Effectively establishing MSE also necessitates collaborative construction of robust interaction rules among diverse stakeholders within a multi-stakeholder framework.

6. Exploration of Participation Willingness and Influencing Factors in Rural Mutual Aid Elderly Care Development

This study investigates the specific factors influencing the sustainable provision of rural mutual support eldercare (MSE), offering significant practical implications for developing differentiated and sustainable models tailored to local contexts. Elderly individuals' choice of eldercare modality is influenced by multifaceted personal factors, including age, gender, education level, and living arrangements. Crucially, the level of social participation among the elderly fundamentally reflects their social well-being. Further efforts are required in China to cultivate a society that venerates older adults and promotes their active engagement ("active aging"). Empirical analyses based on survey data suggest that

enhancing MSE participation necessitates focused strategies: integrating and leveraging endogenous village-based care resources, and amplifying the demonstration effect of exemplary village models. Research employing robust methodologies consistently identifies key determinants of participation willingness. Xin Baoying et al., utilizing Logit and Sobel mediation models, demonstrate that community support mechanisms significantly enhance participation willingness. Strengthening community support, fostering trust, and institutionalizing support mechanisms are vital for increasing trust in eldercare initiatives and promoting mutual assistance among elders. Similarly, Nie Jianliang et al., applying binary logistic regression, reveal the distinct impacts of trust types: particularistic trust (based on locality, diyuan) significantly increases willingness, whereas generalized trust decreases it; institutional trust positively influences participation. Gammonley's findings align, indicating that elders proactively managing their health and those with frequent neighborly interactions exhibit higher participation propensity.

Further granularity is provided by studies examining diverse variables. Hao Yaya et al., through univariate interaction analysis and logistic regression, identify significant influences from education level, activities of daily living (ADL) capacity, living arrangements, annual household income, economic satisfaction, perceived life security concerns, preferences for eldercare security systems, and perceived community care levels. Yu Changyong's survey of 1204 rural elders corroborates health status as a pivotal factor. Tao Weiwei et al., employing regression analysis with instruments like the Barthel Index, UCLA Loneliness Scale, and Social Disability Screening Schedule (SDSS), report that over half of community-dwelling elders express willingness to participate in MSE, underscoring the need for enhanced governmental and community outreach and education. Collectively, these findings underscore the complex interplay of individual characteristics, community dynamics, and institutional factors shaping MSE participation, providing actionable insights for policy and program design aimed at sustainable implementation.

7. Conclusion

Existing literature on rural elders, mutual support eldercare (MSE), and participation willingness provides a substantive foundation, offering valuable insights for this study. While international scholarship pioneered foundational social exchange theories, subsequent multidisciplinary research spanning sociology, economics, and education has progressively deepened the understanding of MSE participation determinants, elucidating the relative impact of diverse factors and identifying significant group variations. Nevertheless, critical research gaps remain evident.

Firstly, prevailing studies predominantly rely on localized field surveys and interviews, often constrained to samples from one or two provinces, specific cities, communities, or institutions. This approach yields limited sample diversity and geographical scope. Future research should leverage comprehensive micro-databases and employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regression modeling to rigorously quantify the influence magnitude of various factors on MSE willingness. This methodological shift is essential for developing more robust, stable, and generalizable predictive models. Secondly, there is insufficient attention to heterogeneous effects. Existing work frequently overlooks nuanced group-level disparities, focusing primarily on individual-level variations within similar populations. This study addresses this gap by explicitly examining the influence of group social norms, relative resource endowments, and the principle of least interest on MSE participation. Furthermore, it incorporates comparative analyses across distinct geographic regions (e.g., metropolitan vs. non-metropolitan

peripheries) and critical age cohorts (e.g., young-old vs. old-old) within the rural elderly population.

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