

Review of *Social Work Practice Knowledge: Theoretical Construction and Action Research*

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Social Work Practice Knowledge: Theoretical Construction and Action Research centers on the reconceptualization of the social work knowledge system and the pursuit of epistemic localization. Moving beyond conventional Western theoretical frameworks, the book advances a practice paradigm grounded in “praxis”—ethical, value-laden action—advocating a shift from technical rationality to context-sensitive practical wisdom. Through the methodological lens of “reflective practice-oriented action research,” it presents a spiral model of co-produced knowledge that dynamically integrates theory and practice, illustrated through empirical case studies conducted in City D. Furthermore, by introducing the “subjectivity-synergy” balancing framework, the work responds to challenges in grassroots governance and constructs an innovative model for government–civil society collaboration. Its academic significance lies in

articulating a distinctively Chinese epistemology for social work, transforming professional education from passive knowledge transmission into the cultivation of reflective professional wisdom, and offering methodological contributions to the broader indigenization of philosophy and social sciences.

The book is structured into three parts: theoretical construction, empirical action research, and concluding reflections. The first part lays the epistemological and methodological foundations across six chapters, addressing: Research Paradigms of Social Work Practice Knowledge; Epistemology of Knowledge Production in Social Work Practice; Methodology of Knowledge Production in Social Work Practice; Self-narrative, Experience Transformation, and the Production of Social Work Practice Knowledge; Empowerment Practice, Professional Relationship Transformation, and the Production of Social Work Practice Knowledge; and The Cultivation of Reflective Practitioners and the Production of Social Work Practice Knowledge. The second part comprises five contextually grounded chapters based on action research in real-world settings: The Field of Social Work Action Research: Practical Scenarios and Professional Services in City D; The Generation Process and Collaborative Practice of Social Work Action Researchers; Action Research and Knowledge Production in Social Work Education; Action Research and Knowledge Production in Professional Practice; and Action Research and Knowledge Production in the Career Development of Social Workers. The final part synthesizes key insights in the conclusion, focusing on Action Research as a Practice-Oriented Approach—Pathways and Methods of Social Work Practice Knowledge Production; Social Workers as Action Researchers; and the educational implications of this reflective, practice-based model of knowledge generation.

What stands out most is the book’s effort to bridge theory and practice by establishing a robust professional

foundation for social work in China. It marks a pivotal moment in the discipline's academic development—one defined by critical self-reflection and intentional theoretical innovation. In confronting the field's long-standing reliance on Western theories and the dominant practice orientation that prioritizes technical efficiency over ethical engagement, the author engages in a rigorous inquiry into a foundational question: From where does social work knowledge originate, and how should it be oriented toward China's unique sociocultural conditions? By constructing a coherent theoretical framework in the first part and grounding it in localized practices in the second, the author not only traces the evolution of diverse paradigms but also proposes an indigenous model of knowledge production. This review examines the work through three interrelated dimensions—paradigm innovation, methodological advancement, and practical transformation—highlighting its transformative potential for disciplinary maturation.

Of particular interest is the paradigmatic shift from “technical operation” to “ethical practice.” Traditional discourse has often framed social work as a standardized technical process, emphasizing replicable assessment tools, intervention protocols, and outcome metrics. Rooted in positivist epistemology, this approach privileges universality, objectivity, and quantifiability. However, Wang Haiyang contends that while such models enhance service efficiency, they risk erasing the profession’s core identity as a morally committed, value-driven practice. Drawing on Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), he calls for a return to *praxis*—an ethically informed mode of action that integrates moral judgment, contextual awareness, and collective agency.

The book offers a systematic critique of four prevailing knowledge paradigms: positivism, which emphasizes causal explanation and behavioral control; critical theory, which reveals structural inequalities yet often lacks practical applicability; hermeneutics, which focuses on meaning-making but may lapse into relativism; and the participatory paradigm, which promotes empowerment but frequently lacks institutional sustainability. Building on this analysis, the author proposes the “practice paradigm” as a synthesizing alternative, asserting that professional knowledge emerges not from detached observation or abstract theorization, but through situated, relational engagement. This shift represents more than an epistemological adjustment—it constitutes a redefinition of the profession itself: social work is not a bureaucratic instrument for policy implementation, but an agentic, justice-oriented practice aimed at human flourishing and social emancipation.

Notably, the author moves beyond theoretical abstraction by operationalizing empowerment into concrete practice mechanisms. In examining spatial justice, for instance, he applies the concept of “spatial

production” to demonstrate how residential segregation systematically denies marginalized urban populations equitable access to public services. In response, he develops actionable “spatial intervention strategies,” such as strategically locating community learning centers for migrant children, thereby embedding theoretical insight within tangible, implementable frameworks.

Methodologically, the book positions action research as the engine of knowledge production. While the first part establishes the theoretical basis, the second part demonstrates its application through case studies in City D. The author introduces “reflective practice-oriented action research,” positioning researchers not as external observers but as active participants, and redefining knowledge as an emergent, iterative product of context-sensitive inquiry.

The education support project for migrant children in City D exemplifies this methodology. Departing from conventional approaches such as standardized surveys and retrospective evaluations, the research team implemented an “iterative participatory design.” In the first phase, in-depth interviews uncovered temporal constraints faced by families—particularly misaligned work schedules that hindered parental involvement in school activities. In the second phase, teachers, social workers, and parents collaboratively designed flexible pick-up arrangements and after-school care models. In the third phase, ongoing feedback was systematically collected and used to refine interventions in real time. This cyclical process not only improved service delivery but also generated empirically grounded, context-specific concepts such as “time poverty” and “disruption of daily order,” enriching the conceptual vocabulary of social work theory.

A particularly innovative contribution is the “double helix model of knowledge generation” introduced in Chapter 9. In a social work education reform initiative, faculty and students formed collaborative research teams: students documented field experiences while instructors facilitated structured reflection and theoretical integration, resulting in a dynamic “teaching-practice-reflection” cycle. This reciprocal structure disrupts the linear hierarchy of “theory first, practice follows,” transforming the classroom into a site of co-constructed knowledge. When interns began feeding their empirically derived strategies back into curriculum development, the educational model evolved from one of knowledge transmission to one of professional wisdom cultivation.

Especially instructive is the book’s exposition of collaborative governance in local contexts—specifically, the rebuilding of professional subjectivity. Amid ongoing reforms in grassroots social governance in China, social work faces a persistent identity tension: it is expected both to fulfill administrative functions and to maintain professional autonomy. To resolve this, Wang Haiyang

proposes a “subjectivity-synergy” balancing framework in Chapter Seven, arguing that social work must avoid both complete subordination to state institutions and disengaged idealism disconnected from institutional realities.

The “Old South Migrants” resettlement project in City D provides compelling empirical validation of this framework. Faced with intersecting challenges—including household registration barriers, employment insecurity, and familial disconnection—the social work team rejected both adversarial resistance and passive accommodation. Instead, they established a “three-tiered negotiation mechanism”: at the macro level, advocating with civil affairs authorities to streamline

residency procedures; at the meso level, coordinating with community organizations to deliver integrated services; and at the micro level, supporting individual households through personalized case management. This multi-level strategy enabled the team to simultaneously uphold professional values and engage constructively with institutional structures, demonstrating how synergy between autonomy and collaboration can yield sustainable, socially just outcomes.

In sum, the book under review is not only a valuable resource for educators, students, scholars, and practitioners in the field of social work, but also contributes significantly to the advancement of social sciences.