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Psychological Adaptation and Social Impacts in the Transformation from an Acquaintance Society to a Stranger Society

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Abstract. With China's rapid urbanization and digitalization, the shift from a traditional acquaintance society to a modern stranger society has become inevitable. This shift moves relationships from trust-based ties to rule- and tech-based networks. In the absence of strong social support, individuals may have to face a sense of isolation and identity confusion. This paper how individuals adapt psychologically during the shift from a "familiar society" to a "stranger society" in China, focusing on trust differentiation, self-identity reconstruction, and community formation. Through organizing the theory about social change, Durkheim's the division of labor in society and the theory of the transformation from acquaintance trust to universal trust, it analyzes the psychological tension brought by social transformation and refers to the adaptation path which involves the individual adaptation, social support and cultural integration. It is argued that the complementarity between system-based trust and selective interpersonal trust, the establishment of an autonomously constructed identity, as well as the rise of virtual communities and a community of shared future, constitute the core psychological resources for individuals to cope with the stranger society.

Keywords: Acquaintance society, Stranger society, Social transformation, Psychological adaptation, Trust reconstruction

1. Introduction

With urbanization, migration from rural areas to cities transforms lifestyles and social interactions, driving economic, cultural, and demographic change. Thus, the traditional acquaintance society has gradually transformed into modern stranger society. According to the culture lag theory proposed by William F. Ogburn, changes in material culture always outpace adjustments in non-material culture. This lag can lead to difficulties in social integration, giving rise to individuals' mental and behavioral adaptation problems [1]. In this process of change, the modernization of the material living environment has advanced rapidly, while traditional interaction customs and trust patterns always hard to adjust. And this type of lag may also result in individuals' interaction anxiety and trust crisis when they are in a strange environment. With the acceleration of social transformation, the economic structure has shifted from traditional industries to high and new technologies and modern service industries, while the development of urbanization has boosted population mobility and the

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diversification of career choices [2]. Meanwhile, the consumption model has also shifted from the "survival-oriented type" that merely meets basic needs to the "development-oriented type" that pursues quality of life. The Internet has moved interaction, shopping, and work online, making ideas more open and individuals' values more diverse. This paper investigates the psychological adaptation problem of individuals during the shift from an acquaintance society to stranger society. Using literature review and theoretical analysis, it organizes theories of social change, Durkheim's The Division of Labor in Society, and trust transformation to reveal the impact of social change on individual psychology. Based on this, adaptive strategies are proposed in three areas: individual adjustment, social support, and cultural integration, to guide the development of social psychology during social transformation.

2. Key features of the transformation from an acquaintance society to a stranger society

2.1. Urbanization and digitalization: drivers of social transformation

According to the push-pull theory, limited job opportunities, lower incomes, and scarce resources in rural areas push people to move to cities; meanwhile, abundant job opportunities, higher incomes, and high-quality resources in cities attract population inflow. This migration has altered population distribution and sped up social change. In the new social structure, interactions depend on social needs and situations rather than long-established intimacy and trust [3]. Besides, the popularization of urbanization and digitalization has promoted the development of social functionalization and contextualization. And interaction between strangers has become common, and the rise of "buddy socializing" places more emphasis on establishing short-term cooperative relationships as needed, with social interaction gradually shifting toward practical functions for survival and development.

This transformation directly affects an individual's psychological state. In traditional society, the pattern of interpersonal trust based on blood ties and geographical proximity is gradually losing its effectiveness. Individuals in unfamiliar environments find it difficult to trust others unconditionally, and they have not fully adapted to the new type of trust based on institutions and contracts. This lack of trust can easily lead to widespread social anxiety and unease [4]. Furthermore, the collective identity once defined by family and neighborhood ties has been disrupted. Individuals must redefine themselves through professional achievements and social evaluations, and this uncertainty leads to persistent identity anxiety [5]. However, people are also attempting to rebuild trust and emotional connections in the new social models. They establish selective trust based on common values through interest groups and professional circles, and seek recognition and harmony in short-term collaborations on dating apps. Although these methods are different from the deep emotional connections in traditional acquaintance society, they offer new possibilities for individuals to seek a sense of belonging in a society of strangers.

2.2. Durkheim and the division of labor: insights into social transformation

Durkheim pointed out that with the deepening of social division of labor, social solidarity has transformed from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity, revealing the inherent logic of the evolution from an acquaintance society to a stranger society [6]. And mechanical solidarity relies on individual homogeneity, with blood and geographical ties promoting shared values and norms, while collective consciousness strongly binds individual behavior. In contrast, organic solidarity stems from specialized division of labor. As individuals form interdependent and functionally complementary relationships through specialization, the binding force of collective consciousness

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weakens, individual identities become more independent, and the foundation for social integration shifts toward mutual dependence and cooperation.

Based on Durkheim's theory, the transformation from an acquaintance society to a stranger society is essentially a process of evolving from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity. In traditional societies, the division of labor was simple, and both life and production were highly homogeneous, with behaviors guided by collective consciousness. With modernization, urban roles became specialized, and individuals function as specialized parts of the social system. Individuals form complementary relationships through division of labor, even without blood or geographical ties. This change has not only reshaped the foundation of social unity, but also enhanced the independence of individuals. At the same time, the function of law has also changed: it has shifted from a punitive and repressive function centered on punishment to a restorative function that emphasizes regulation and mediation. Therefore, the focus is no longer on punishing violations, but on restoring disrupted cooperative relationships. For instance, workplace disputes and market breach issues are resolved through legal provisions to ensure the smooth operation of cooperative relationships among all parties. Thus, the deepening of the social division of labor has reshaped the social structure, providing institutional and structural support for the formation of a stranger society.

3. Individual psychological order: reshaping and adaptation amid social transformation

The shift from an "acquaintance society" to a "stranger society" reflects individuals' psychological adaptation to social change. They adjust behaviors and expectations, develop new social skills through diverse workplace collaboration, and restructure their psychological order to adapt to new interaction patterns.

3.1. Transformation and diversification of the trust model

Interpersonal trust in an acquaintance society gradually evolves into two complementary forms as the society becomes a stranger society [7]. In this context, system trust arises from impersonal mechanisms such as legal and credit systems [8]. For example, in online shopping, consumers and merchants can conduct transactions smoothly even without prior acquaintance. This depends on consumers' trust in the platform's rules and after-sales guarantees. Such a mechanism effectively reduces the risks of interaction, making large-scale collaboration among strangers possible. Besides, selective interpersonal trust usually develops in informal settings like interest or professional groups [9]. For example, members of a photography community gather around shared interests. Through mutual recognition of each other's work styles and values, they gradually build trust. This kind of trust relies on shared values and identities, and it is usually cultivated gradually within a relatively familiar small circle.

In fact, these two forms of trust are intertwined in many scenarios. For instance, in internet-based financial lending, the system ensures fund security through trust mechanisms, while selective trust is based on credit ratings and past records [10]. High-quality customers are more likely to receive financial support. It can be said that system trust provides a sense of security for large-scale collaboration in a stranger society, encouraging individuals to break out of their familiar circles and explore a broader world. Meanwhile, selective interpersonal trust meets the need for emotional connection, enabling individuals to find like-minded people with shared values even outside formal rules. From the maintenance of social order to interactions within personal social circles, this "trust structure where major matters rely on rules and minor matters rely on circle recognition" is precisely

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the most suitable adaptive strategy that individuals have developed to meet their psychological needs during the transition from an acquaintance society to a stranger society.

3.2. Reconstruction and dilemmas of self-identity

The psychological counterpart of Durkheim's transition from mechanical to organic solidarity is the transition from a collectively shaped individual identity to one that is self-constructed. In traditional societies, individual identity was determined by inherent factors like family and region, and social circles and social roles were relatively fixed. In a society of strangers, individuals continuously affirm their self-worth through factors such as professional achievements and social evaluations. Frequent job changes and career transitions across different industries have become the norm. For instance, people who were originally working in traditional manufacturing industries might switch to the internet sector due to their increased interest and abilities, changing their identity from manufacturing workers to internet professionals. In terms of social evaluation, online social networking has broken the geographical barriers. Individuals showcase their talents and viewpoints through social media and gain widespread attention and evaluations. This is different from the traditional social evaluation based on neighborhood recommendations. Online bloggers accumulate fans through high-quality content and restructure their online identities.

However, this freedom to reshape identity often brings anxiety, as individuals face the question "Who am I?" amid diverse choices. The absence of clear value standards may lead some to burnout or depression. In modern society, the frequency of identity changes has increased. The stability of traditional identities stems from the constancy of endowments, while self-constructed identities are dynamic and subject to adjustment. Careers may change, social evaluations may reverse, and individuals need to constantly recalibrate their self-positioning. This uncertainty has exacerbated the widespread sense of identity anxiety [11]. When "who I am" is no longer defined by the collective but needs to be constantly proven through personal efforts, some people may feel confused due to the instability of value measurement standards, and even become exhausted in the process of continuous self-construction [12].

3.3. Reconstruction and adaptation of community consciousness

As traditional communities disintegrate, individuals rebuild belonging through shared or imagined ties. Virtual interest-based communities online help people overcome physical limits and connect with like-minded groups [13]. In the online community of photography enthusiasts, although the members come from different places, they gather together due to their shared passion, sharing their works and techniques, and receiving emotional support and a sense of identity. This interest-based connection fills the emotional gap in a society of strangers and satisfies the need for companionship and emotional resonance. Furthermore, there are also communities focused on public issues, such as environmental protection and welfare activities [14]. People from diverse backgrounds unite around shared goals, forming social connections beyond personal ties, thus enhancing social responsibility, and fulfilling their needs for value and meaning.

These two communities are not mutually exclusive; rather, they complement each other in social interactions. The virtual community, through the bonds of shared interests and common identities, helps individuals seek emotional resonance and a sense of belonging within a specific community. In a society of strangers, this kind of community alleviates the loneliness and isolation of individuals, provides them with emotional support, and re-establishes interpersonal connections in a highly differentiated and mobile social environment. Furthermore, the community of shared destiny

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broadens individuals' social perspectives through common issues and collective actions, enhances their recognition of social responsibilities and collective goals, and promotes the pursuit of self-meaning and a sense of belonging to a broader community. The concurrent effect of these two communities helps individuals obtain comfort and recognition on both emotional and social levels, thereby enabling them to better adapt to the new social interaction patterns in a society of strangers.

4. Psychological adaptation in the transition from an acquaintance society to a stranger society

With the transition from a familiar society to a society of strangers, the psychological tension of individuals gradually increases. Thus, a comprehensive strategy needs to be constructed from three dimensions: individual adjustment, social support, and cultural integration. This strategy maintains traditional psychological traits while adapting to the changes in modern society.

4.1. Individual adaptation and the formation of dual trust

During the process of adapting to the transition from a familiar social environment to a stranger one, individuals need to address the conflict between emotional needs and social norms by establishing a dual trust structure, redefining their self-identity, and mastering psychological adjustment skills.

Individuals should establish a dual trust system [15]. In private life, "special trust" is maintained via relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. In public life, "universal trust" is established through rules, contracts, and systems, ensuring safe interactions across regions. Besides, awareness of social trust changes helps individuals accept "diminished human relationships," easing anxiety and balancing private and public needs. In addition, the key to resolving the confusion about one's identity lies in redefining one's own identity. Individuals should shift from relying on the traditional "collective identity" to self-positioning based on occupation, interests and social contributions. This helps reduce reliance on a single identity and enables the confirmation of self-worth in a diverse social environment. At the same time, individuals should also enhance their interpersonal skills and actively participate in workplace collaborations, interest groups, and charitable activities, expanding their social circle and establishing positive relationships with strangers, providing more support for their self-identity. Furthermore, learning psychological adjustment skills is an effective way to cope with the psychological pressure brought about by social transformation. Facing cultural clashes and nostalgia, individuals should regulate emotions and soothe inner discomfort via rational thinking. Meanwhile, actively participating in urban public activities or community volunteer work can help reduce the sense of strangeness and defensive mentality towards strangers, thereby better adapting to social changes and reducing psychological burdens.

4.2. Improvement of social support and adaptive mechanisms

To help individuals adapt to a society of strangers, the social support system and cultural adaptation mechanisms must be improved. At the institutional level, community support, public services, and social security are strengthened, and practical assistance is provided. Culturally, the integration of traditional culture with modern values should be boosted, psychological pressure experienced in the process of change transformation should be alleviated, and a smooth transition should be facilitated.

Accordingly, society must provide comprehensive support and connections, thereby encouraging community organizations to run more public activities, bridging gaps between people, and fostering effective interaction and cooperation. Besides, improving public service facilities help communities restore traditional ties and enhance residents' sense of belonging. The social credit system should be

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strengthened, and transparent evaluation standards should reduce interaction risks and build trust across different groups. Furthermore, the improvement of the social security system can provide economic support for residents during the transformation process, reducing their burden of survival. In addition, a comprehensive psychological service network should be established in both urban and rural areas, providing psychological counseling for key groups, and offering online consultation and psychological education through digital platforms. These measures can help individuals cope with psychological challenges during transition and support the stable functioning of society. At the cultural level, it is necessary to integrate tradition and modernity, maintaining cultural continuity while adapting to changes in the times. For instance, based on the "degree of closeness" principle in the diffuse pattern, and guided by modern ethical standards, interpersonal communication methods can be adjusted to prevent conflicts between tradition and modernity. Rational approaches should be adopted to deal with psychological adaptation issues. And mutual assistance and trust among strangers should be encouraged, and social harmony should be promoted.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the psychological adaptation challenges individuals face as China transitions from a familiar society to a society of strangers. With urbanization and digitalization advancing, individuals adjust their mental states to cope with conflicts between traditional social patterns and modern norms. By establishing a dual trust system, redefining one's self-identity, and mastering psychological adjustment skills, individuals can balance their emotional needs and social norms in both the private and public domains, realize their own value, and establish a new social identity. However, though individuals can gradually adapt to the society of strangers through these strategies, there are still issues of identity confusion and emotional void during the transformation process. In this context, the improvement of the social support system and the strengthening of the cultural adaptation mechanism are particularly important. By enhancing community services, promoting the social credit system, and providing psychological support, society can offer stronger assistance to individuals, facilitating a smoother transition to the new social model. In the actual implementation process, how to balance these strategies in a diverse social environment remains a complex issue. Future research can explore their implementation in specific urban or rural communities, examine adaptation differences across social groups, and investigate how cultural integration and social policies can further promote individual and collective psychological adaptation.

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