

Demographic Differences of Emotional Labor among Frontline Social Workers in China

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Abstract: Despite growing attention to the development of the social work profession in China, research on the emotional labor of Chinese frontline social workers remains limited. Our study aimed to extend our understanding of the demographic differences of emotional labor among Chinese social workers. 605 social workers completed the emotional labor scale including multiple dimensions online (78.90% female, for age group: under 25 = 29.60%, 26–30 = 29.93%, 31–40 = 36.80%, and over 40 = 8.44%). We conduct ANOVA analysis to examine the demographic differences. Our findings supported that: (1) female social workers reported significantly higher levels of surface acting compared to their male counterparts. (2) Older social workers reported lower levels of surface acting and higher levels of deep acting than younger ones. (3) Married social workers reported higher levels of deep acting and lower levels of surface acting than unmarried and spouse-change social workers. (4) Social workers with intermediate or higher professional qualifications showed longer duration and higher frequency of emotional labor than those with no or only primary-level certifications. (5) Social workers with a social work–related educational background demonstrated longer emotional labor duration than those from unrelated fields. (6) Social workers earning 4,000 yuan or less reported longer emotional labor duration but lower emotional identification. Our study revealed that Chinese social workers with more personal and professional resources tend to perform more deep acting and sustain emotional labor longer, while those with fewer resources rely more on surface acting and show lower emotional identification. Targeted support is needed to promote emotional well-being and professional sustainability.

1. Introduction

In China, social work as a professional field has undergone a 35-year development trajectory. Since its revival and reconstruction in the early years of the Reform and Opening-Up era, the profession has moved through stages of practical exploration and professionalization, accelerated by institutional reforms and policy support ^[1]. The recent establishment of the Central Social Work Department marks a new milestone in this journey. Against the broader backdrop of strengthening and innovating social governance nationwide, social work in China is advancing rapidly toward greater professionalization,

vocationalization, and industrialization. Frontline social workers play a pivotal role in this transformation ^[2]. They are not only implementers of policy but also direct service providers who bridge the gap between the government and communities, especially vulnerable populations. Their daily work requires managing complex client relationships, navigating institutional constraints, and sustaining emotional resilience—making emotional labor a central and inevitable aspect of their practice ^[3]. However, despite growing attention to the development of the social work profession in China, research on the emotional labor of frontline social workers remains limited.

Emotional labor involves managing emotional expressions through observable behaviors ^[4]. Previous research noticed that emotional labor plays a key role in social work service ^[5]. Compared to other service professionals such as nurses and teachers, social workers tend to maintain long-term emotional relationships and engage in deeper interactions with their clients. When social workers perform emotional labor appropriately, it not only facilitates the establishment and maintenance of professional relationships with clients, but also enhances client and colleague satisfaction, thereby improving job performance and work efficiency ^[6-8]. However, when social workers engage excessively in inappropriate forms of emotional labor—such as surface acting, which involves suppressing true emotions and displaying emotions that are not genuinely felt—it can harm their psychological well-being and hinder their professional development ^[9-10]. While some studies have touched on burnout and job satisfaction in social work ^[11-12], few have examined how emotional labor strategies vary across demographic groups among Chinese frontline social workers. This research gap is particularly important, given that factors such as gender, age, education level, years of experience, and job title may shape how emotional labor is perceived, regulated, and enacted. In the context of China's rapidly evolving social work profession, understanding these demographic differences is crucial for designing targeted support systems, optimizing workforce management, and promoting sustainable career development.

Therefore, this study focuses on exploring the demographic variations in emotional labor among frontline social workers in China to provide a more differentiated and evidence-based foundation for policy and practice.

1.1. Multiple dimensions of emotional labor

Scholars have proposed various dimensional frameworks to conceptualize emotional labor. Hochschild, the pioneer in this field, initially distinguished between surface acting and deep acting—with the former referring to modifying external expressions without changing internal feelings, and the latter involving efforts to align genuine emotions with display rules ^[4]. Building on this, Ashforth and Humphrey introduced a third dimension: genuine emotional expression, emphasizing the spontaneous expression of authentic emotions in service interactions ^[13]. Grandey further integrated emotional labor into a self-regulation framework, highlighting the cognitive processes behind emotion management ^[14]. Brotheridge and Lee extended the model to include frequency, duration, and variety of emotional display, offering a more behavioral and situational perspective ^[9]. These dimensional models collectively deepen our understanding of the complexity and variability of emotional labor across contexts and occupations, including frontline social work. Given the comprehensiveness and empirical applicability of emotional labor, especially in human service professions, this study adopts Brotheridge and Lee's framework to better capture the complexity of emotional labor among frontline social workers in China ^[9].

1.2. Demographic characteristics and emotional labor

Research suggests that demographic factors—including gender, age, marital status, and etc.—may influence how individuals experience and perform emotional labor ^[15-17].

Gender is one of the most consistently examined variables in emotional labor research, with studies

showing that women generally engage in more emotional labor than men ^[18-19], especially in helping professions like social work ^[20]. This tendency is shaped by socialized gender role expectations, which associate women with empathy, warmth, and emotional expressiveness ^[21]. Furthermore, women are more likely to adopt deep acting strategies—authentically aligning inner feelings with required emotional displays—whereas men tend to rely more on surface acting ^[20].

Age also plays a significant role in shaping how social workers perform emotional labor. Older workers generally demonstrate greater emotional maturity, more effective regulation strategies, and lower susceptibility to emotional exhaustion ^[1]. Research suggests that with age and experience, workers are more likely to use deep acting, while younger professionals—lacking experience and emotional resilience—are more inclined toward surface acting and may struggle with emotional dissonance ^[22-23].

Marital status, too, influences emotional labor through its impact on emotional resources and coping capacity. Married social workers, while potentially burdened by the dual demands of work and family, often benefit from greater emotional support systems, which may buffer the strain of emotional labor ^[24-25]. However, marriage—particularly for women—is tightly linked to societal expectations regarding emotional expression and caregiving ^[26]. As a result, married female social workers may face heightened emotional display rules, which can lead to increased reliance on deep acting and a higher overall emotional labor load.

Professional qualification, work region, educational background, and salary level may also contribute to variations in emotional labor among frontline social workers. Those with higher professional credentials may possess better emotional regulation strategies and greater autonomy, reducing reliance on surface acting. Regional disparities—such as between urban and rural areas—can influence organizational support and emotional demands, with urban social workers often facing more complex client expectations. Educational background shapes theoretical understanding and coping mechanisms, as those trained in social work are more likely to apply professional emotional regulation strategies. Additionally, salary level affects emotional labor by influencing perceived job value and burnout risk; inadequate compensation may amplify emotional strain, while fair wages can enhance emotional resilience and job satisfaction.

1.3. Our study

Our study aimed at exploring the demographic differences of multiple dimensions of emotional labor among Chinese social workers to provide a more differentiated understanding for policy and practice of emotional labor in social work.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

We conducted a convenient sampling survey, 752 social workers completed a questionnaire online. A total of 147 participants were excluded due to excessively short response times and highly uniform answers. 605 social workers were concluded for further analysis (78.90% female, for age group: under 25 = 29.60%, 26–30 = 29.93%, 31–40 = 36.80%, and over 40 = 8.44%).

2.2. Measurements

2.2.1. Emotional labor scale

We revised the Emotional Labour Scale (ELS) developed by Brotheridge & Lee (2003) according to match the work dynamic of social workers. The original scale included multiple dimensions:

frequency (e.g., “At work, I need to adjust my emotional expressions according to the situation.”), intensity (e.g., “At work, I need to make clients feel strong emotions (such as affirmation or opposition)”.), variety of emotional display (e.g., “At work, I am able to display emotions appropriate to the job (such as calmness and joy)”.), the duration of interaction (e.g., “how many minutes does a typical interaction between you and a service user last? ”.), surface acting, and deep acting (1 = never, 5 = always). The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.843.

2.2.2. Demographic variables

We collected important demographic factors like gender, age group, educational level, marital status, work experience, professionalization level, and monthly salary.

3. Results

3.1. Gender differences of emotional labor

The results of independent samples t-test in Table 1 showed that Male social worker ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.07$) had a higher level of surface acting than female social workers ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.04$).

Table 1: Gender differences of emotional labor

Dimensions	Gender($M \pm SD$)		t	SE
	Male($N=123$)	Female($N=482$)		
Duration	36.23 \pm 2.38	40.21 \pm 1.61	1.370	0.574
Frequency	3.83 \pm 0.05	3.85 \pm 0.03	-0.400	0.960
Intensity	3.40 \pm 0.07	3.39 \pm 0.03	0.160	0.176
Variety	3.90 \pm 0.06	3.40 \pm 0.03	-0.519	0.422
Surface acting	3.35 \pm 0.07	3.18 \pm 0.04	2.176*	0.702
Deep acting	4.18 \pm 0.06	4.14 \pm 0.03	0.750	0.124

Note: * $p < .05$, two tailed.

3.2. Age group differences of emotional labor

Table 2 Age group differences of emotional labor

Dimensions	Age group($M \pm SD$)				F	SE
	Under 25($N=179$)	26-30 ($N=197$)	31-40($N=183$)	Over 40($N=46$)		
Duration	37.83 \pm 1.61	40.62 \pm 3.02	38.66 \pm 2.46	43.26 \pm 4.85	0.445	0.319
Frequency	3.85 \pm 0.05	3.85 \pm 0.04	3.85 \pm 0.04	3.83 \pm 0.09	0.0117	0.332
Intensity	3.32 \pm 0.05	3.40 \pm 0.05	3.44 \pm 0.05	3.38 \pm 0.10	0.833	0.330
Variety	3.96 \pm 0.04	3.94 \pm 0.05	3.90 \pm 0.05	3.92 \pm 0.10	0.275	0.349
Surface acting	3.31 \pm 0.06	3.24 \pm 0.06	3.16 \pm 0.06	2.93 \pm 0.13	3.326*	0.402
Deep acting	4.05 \pm 0.05	4.14 \pm 0.04	4.24 \pm 0.04	4.23 \pm 0.09	3.154*	0.764

Note: * $p < .05$, two tailed.

While the results of the multifactor ANOVA in Table 2 showed that there was significant differences between the 4 age groups. Specially, In terms of surface acting, social workers aged 25 or below, 26–30, and 31–40 reported significantly higher levels than those aged 41 or above. For deep acting, social workers aged 31–40 and over 40 showed significantly higher levels than those aged 25 or below and those aged 26–30. Table 2 Age group differences of emotional labor.

3.3. Marital status differences of emotional labor

In terms of surface acting, unmarried and married social workers both reported significantly higher

levels than those who had experienced a spouse change (see Table 3). Regarding deep acting, married social workers reported higher levels than unmarried ones, who in turn reported higher levels than those with a spouse change.

Table 3 Marital status differences of emotional labor

Dimensions	Marital status($M \pm SD$)			F	SE
	Unmarried ($N=308$)	Married ($N=287$)	Spouse change ($N=10$)		
Duration	38.29 \pm 1.30	40.83 \pm 2.52	32.50 \pm 5.34	0.635	0.319
Frequency	3.85 \pm 0.03	3.86 \pm 0.04	3.63 \pm 0.26	0.703	0.332
Intensity	3.35 \pm 0.04	3.43 \pm 0.05	3.23 \pm 0.29	1.136	0.330
Variety	3.98 \pm 0.03	3.89 \pm 0.04	3.60 \pm 0.31	2.954	0.349
Surface acting	3.27 \pm 0.05	3.18 \pm 0.05	2.67 \pm 0.24	3.5*	0.402
Deep acting	4.11 \pm 0.04	4.20 \pm 0.03	3.70 \pm 0.30	4.3*	0.764

Note: * $p < .05$, two tailed.

3.4. Professional certificates differences of emotional labor

Significant differences were found in the frequency and duration dimensions of emotional labor among frontline social workers. In terms of frequency, social workers with intermediate or higher professional qualifications reported significantly higher scores than those without qualifications or with only primary-level certification. Regarding duration, social workers with intermediate or higher professional qualifications also reported significantly higher scores than those without certification or with only primary-level qualifications (see Table 4).

Table 4 Professional certificates of emotional labor

Dimensions	Professional certificates($M \pm SD$)			F	SE
	No certification($N=158$)	Junior certificate ($N=333$)	Intermediate Certificate and above ($N=114$)		
Duration	33.07 \pm 1.96	39.36 \pm 1.35	48.29 \pm 5.39	6.885**	0.004
Frequency	3.78 \pm 0.06	3.85 \pm 0.03	3.96 \pm 0.04	3.035*	0.001
Intensity	3.37 \pm 0.07	3.37 \pm 0.04	3.46 \pm 0.06	0.704	0.013
Variety	3.91 \pm 0.06	3.95 \pm 0.03	3.91 \pm 0.05	0.27	0.003
Surface acting	3.19 \pm 0.07	3.25 \pm 0.04	3.16 \pm 0.07	0.592	0.010
Deep acting	4.19 \pm 0.05	4.13 \pm 0.03	4.14 \pm 0.05	0.457	0.012

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, two tailed.

3.5. Educational background differences of emotional labor

Table 5 Educational background of emotional labor

Dimensions	Educational background($M \pm SD$)		t	SE
	Social work and related majors ($N=283$)	Majors unrelated to social work ($N=322$)		
Duration	43.81 \pm 2.403	35.52 \pm 1.442	3.038*	0.156
Frequency	3.85 \pm 0.03	3.85 \pm 0.03	0.077	0.154
Intensity	3.25 \pm 0.04	3.43 \pm 0.04	1.351	0.002
Variety	3.90 \pm 0.04	3.96 \pm 0.04	1.142	0.799
Surface acting	3.18 \pm 0.05	3.24 \pm 0.04	0.858	0.654
Deep acting	4.10 \pm 0.04	4.19 \pm 0.04	1.690	0.098

Note: * $p < .05$, two tailed.

Significant differences were found in the duration of emotional labor among frontline social

workers. In terms of duration, social workers with a background in social work-related majors reported significantly higher scores than those from non-social work-related majors (see Table 5).

3.6. Monthly salary differences of emotional labor

In Table 6, social workers with a monthly salary of 4,000 CNY or below reported significantly higher scores of surface acting than those earning 4,001–6,000 CNY and above 6,000 CNY. Moreover, social workers earning 4,001–6,000 CNY reported the highest scores of emotional labor variety, followed by those earning above 6,000 CNY and those earning 4,000 CNY or below.

Table 6 Monthly salary differences of emotional labor

Dimensions	Monthly salary level($M \pm SD$)			F	SE
	4,000 CNY or below($N=311$)	4,001–6,000 CNY ($N = 226$)	Above 6,000 CNY($N=68$)		
Duration	43.38 \pm 1.89	35.24 \pm 2.28	28.63 \pm 2.24	6.461**	0.063
Frequency	3.83 \pm 0.03	3.95 \pm 0.06	3.81 \pm 0.07	1.084	0.013
Intensity	3.34 \pm 0.03	3.48 \pm 0.09	3.53 \pm 0.08	2.189	0.030
Variety	3.87 \pm 0.03	4.08 \pm 0.06	3.99 \pm 0.07	3.307*	0.029
Surface acting	3.19 \pm 0.04	3.25 \pm 0.10	3.25 \pm 0.07	0.281	0.656
Deep acting	4.14 \pm 0.03	4.25 \pm 0.07	4.08 \pm 0.08	1.785	0.102

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, two tailed.

4. Discussions

Overall, we found differences across multiple dimensions of emotional labor in relation to gender, age group, marital status, professional certification, educational background, and income level.

4.1. Gender differences of emotional labor

From a gender perspective, female social workers reported higher levels of surface acting compared to their male counterparts, which is consistent to previous studies^[18-19]. On one hand, traditional gender role expectations often associate emotional caregiving with women, making female social workers more accustomed to employing surface acting strategies in emotional labor. They are generally expected to display greater warmth, empathy, and emotional sensitivity, which leads them to actively regulate their outward emotional expressions to maintain client relationships and fulfill professional role expectations^[27]. On the other hand, due to social norms that discourage emotional expression among men, male social workers may engage in surface acting less frequently. They tend to emphasize rationality, emotional control, and a sense of detachment^[27]. When responding to clients' emotional needs, they are more likely to adopt task-oriented or problem-solving approaches rather than managing their outward emotions to sustain relational harmony. Therefore, under the influence of gender role expectations, structural differences may exist between male and female social workers in their use of surface acting.

4.2. Age differences of emotional labor

Our results indicate that as social workers age, their level of surface acting tends to decrease, while their level of deep acting increases. Newcomers to the profession often exhibit higher levels of enthusiasm and emotional fluctuation. With increasing age, social workers are likely to accumulate more emotional experience, which enhances their understanding of and ability to manage emotional labor^[28]. Older social workers may be more adept at handling complex emotional issues and regulating their emotional states in a more flexible and effective manner^[29].

In addition, differences in life experience across age groups may also influence how social workers engage in emotional labor. Younger social workers, who may not yet have encountered many life challenges and are just entering the workforce, often respond to clients with high enthusiasm. They may engage more frequently in surface acting and might lack the emotional maturity and coping skills needed to navigate emotionally intense situations ^[23]. In contrast, older social workers, having experienced more of life's ups and downs and accumulated greater work experience, are likely to have a deeper understanding of their profession ^[22]. Their approach to emotional issues is often more mature, composed, and grounded.

4.3. Marital status differences of emotional labor

Our results showed that married social workers reported higher levels of deep acting and lower levels of surface acting compared to unmarried social workers and those who had experienced a spouse change. Married social workers often benefit from more stable intimate relationships and greater family support ^[30]. They also tend to have more life experience and more mature emotional regulation skills ^[31]. Through long-term interpersonal interactions and relationship management, they are likely to develop more internalized emotional regulation strategies, making them more adept at deep acting. These emotional resources help them manage emotional challenges at work more effectively, enabling them to genuinely experience and express emotions that align with professional expectations, rather than merely suppressing or faking their feelings.

In contrast, unmarried social workers or those who have experienced a spouse change may have less emotional support and less stable emotional regulation strategies. They may be in a period of emotional turbulence or relationship reconstruction, which can lead to higher levels of emotional exhaustion ^[32]. With limited internal resources and unintegrated emotions, they are more likely to rely on surface acting strategies as a way to cope with the emotional demands of their work.

4.4. Professional certificates and educational background differences of emotional labor

Higher levels of professional certification typically indicate that social workers have mastered more comprehensive theories and methods of social work, particularly in areas such as emotional regulation, psychological counseling, and interpersonal communication ^[33]. These competencies enable them to be more willing and capable of engaging in sustained emotional labor, thereby extending the duration of emotional interactions with clients. Additionally, social workers with intermediate or higher-level qualifications tend to have a deeper understanding of the nature of emotional labor ^[34]. Rather than viewing it merely as a job requirement, they see it as a vital tool for building professional relationships and achieving service goals. This perspective fosters a stronger identification with the emotions they express during emotional labor and reinforces their view of emotional labor as an integral part of professional social work practice.

Moreover, social workers with academic backgrounds in social work tend to engage in emotional labor for longer durations than those from non-social work majors. During their professional education, social work students typically receive systematic training in emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, empathy development, and professional ethics ^[35]. These courses help them understand the significance of emotional labor both theoretically and practically, and internalize it as a habitual part of their professional conduct. This specialized training enhances their awareness of the value of emotional labor in their work, making them more willing to invest time in building deeper emotional connections with clients. Furthermore, having a social work background often means these individuals have already gained practical experience in emotional labor through internships and fieldwork. Before entering the workforce, they are generally equipped with the skills to manage complex interpersonal and emotional situations. As a result, they tend to show greater patience and emotional involvement with service users, and are less likely to withdraw prematurely.

due to emotional exhaustion—leading to a longer duration of emotional labor in practice.

4.5. Monthly salary level differences of emotional labor

Social workers with lower salaries may be required to spend longer periods engaging in emotional labor due to heavy job responsibilities and insufficient staffing. As a result, they often have to invest more time in addressing the emotional needs of service users. At the same time, lower income may negatively affect their sense of professional identity and job satisfaction, further weakening their understanding of the positive value of emotional labor^[36]. Additionally, these workers are more likely to view emotional labor as a burden or an additional form of emotional depletion, rather than as a meaningful tool for achieving professional goals^[37]. Consequently, their emotional expression tends to be driven more by external rules than by internal motivation, leading to a lower level of identification with the emotions they display.

5. Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. First, as China is a vast and diverse country, our sample only represents frontline social workers in Guangdong Province, which limits the generalizability of our findings. Second, the data were collected through self-reported measures, which may be subject to common method bias. Third, some subgroups had relatively small sample sizes, such as social workers who had experienced a spouse change, which may reduce statistical power. Fourth, while ANOVA revealed significant group differences, this method does not explain the underlying reasons for these differences.

6. Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, our findings provide insights for developing more targeted interventions for emotional labor among social workers. First, recognizing that gender influences emotional labor strategies can help both male and female social workers develop more adaptive approaches—women may benefit from training that supports deeper emotional engagement beyond surface acting, while men may need encouragement to explore and express empathy more openly in professional settings.

Second, younger social workers should be aware of their tendency to rely more on surface acting due to limited emotional experience. Targeted mentorship and emotional regulation training can support their growth toward deeper emotional engagement. Older social workers, who tend to engage more in deep acting, may serve as role models in navigating complex emotional challenges.

Third, married social workers reported more deep acting, possibly due to stronger emotional resources and relational stability. For unmarried or recently separated social workers, peer support systems or counseling services may be valuable in enhancing their emotional resilience and ability to engage authentically with clients.

Fourth, those with higher professional qualifications and social work-related educational backgrounds tend to engage more deeply and for longer durations in emotional labor. Social workers with less training may consider continuing education or supervision to build emotional competence and increase identification with the emotional aspects of their roles.

Lastly, social workers with lower incomes reported longer emotional labor duration but less emotional identification, suggesting a risk of emotional exhaustion. For these individuals, setting emotional boundaries, engaging in self-care practices, and advocating for better working conditions may be crucial steps toward sustainable professional development.

7. Conclusions

This study contributes to an understanding of what are the demographic differences of emotional labor among Chinese social worker. The findings suggest that:

(1) Female social workers reported significantly higher levels of surface acting compared to their male counterparts.

(2) Older social workers reported lower levels of surface acting and higher levels of deep acting than younger ones.

(3) Married social workers reported higher levels of deep acting and lower levels of surface acting than unmarried and spouse-change social workers.

(4) Social workers with intermediate or higher professional qualifications showed longer duration and higher frequency of emotional labor than those with no or only primary-level certifications.

(5) Social workers with a social work-related educational background demonstrated longer emotional labor duration than those from unrelated fields.

(6) Social workers earning 4,000 yuan or less reported longer emotional labor duration but lower emotional identification.

This study highlights significant individual differences in emotional labor among frontline social workers in China. Gender, age, marital status, professional qualification, educational background, and income level were all associated with distinct emotional labor patterns. Specifically, those with greater emotional and professional resources—such as older age, stable marital status, higher qualifications, and relevant educational training—were more likely to engage in deep acting and sustained emotional labor. In contrast, individuals with fewer resources, including younger, unmarried, or lower-paid social workers, tended to rely more on surface acting and reported weaker emotional identification. These findings underscore the need for targeted support and capacity-building strategies to enhance emotional labor sustainability in the social work profession.

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