Research on the Coproduction of Community Elderly Education Public Services with the Participation of Diverse Actors: A Case Study of the Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict, Tianjin

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Abstract: As the degree of population aging further intensifies and the living standards of our country's residents improve, community elderly education has become an important component of grassroots public services. The participation of diverse actors in the coproduction of community elderly education public services has become a new trend in the development of community elderly education. This study takes the Silver-Aged College established in H Subdistrict of Tianjin under the 'stranger society' as a starting point, and deeply analyses the establishment mechanism of coproduction in community elderly education public services with the participation of diverse actors. The study finds that: First, the appeal of community elderly education to the coproduction model can achieve 'cost reduction and efficiency increase' in the supply of public services and good governance at the grassroots level. Second, the participation of diverse actors in the coproduction of community elderly education public services shows five important mechanisms, namely the party-building leadership mechanism, informal leadership mechanism, spatial production mechanism, community network mechanism, and value cocreation mechanism. This study explains the coproduction in the field of community elderly education, broadens the connotation of the traditional coproduction concept, and provides experience and insights for the development of community elderly education in our country.

Keywords: Community Elderly Education; Coproduction; Community Governance

1. Introduction

With the improvement of living standards among residents in our country, the concept of lifelong education has gradually become a social consensus. Against the backdrop of an aging population, optimizing the supply of community elderly education services and effectively managing community elderly education at the doorstep has become an integral part of the strategy to actively respond to aging, as well as the goal of 'building a learning society and a great learning nation for all citizens.' 'Expanding the provision of elderly education resources' has become an important policy target for governments at all levels, especially for grassroots governments.

Meanwhile, public health crises have spurred public participation in community governance and the provision of public services [1-3]: from engaging in volunteer services to neighborhood mutual aid, from participating in grassroots governance to self-resolution of disputes, all are manifestations of this trend. It is against this backdrop that a new approach has been provided for the sustainable and high-quality development of community elderly education, which has long been facing fiscal and resource constraints. This approach is the coproduction involving diverse actors. The coproduction model, as a new concept, differs from traditional public service governance models and can help the development of community elderly education transcend the dilemma of 'more services, less taxation' [4].

However, the field of community elderly education public services has rarely been examined in terms of coproduction. Most studies only emphasize the involvement of 'diverse actors' in the construction of community elderly education, without rising to the level of diverse actors engaging in the coproduction of community elderly education public services (including the commissioning, design, delivery, assessment of public services). Therefore, the research question of this paper is: How can the participation of multiple stakeholders be realized in the coproduction of community elderly education

public services?

2. The Case of the Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict, Tianjin

H Subdistrict faced dual governance dilemmas in carrying out the construction of community elderly education: (1) The high proportion of 'active elderly' leading to a strong demand for high-quality community elderly education and the contradiction of fiscal shortages at the grassroots government level: Community elderly education rarely tops the governance agenda of grassroots governments [5], and often lacks special financial support. Moreover, there is a scarcity of community elderly education resources in China [6], with most grassroots governments needing to initiate community elderly education from scratch, requiring significant financial input and workload for grassroots staff. H Subdistrict, having been established for a short time, lacks experience and existing resources for conducting community elderly education. Additionally, H Subdistrict is located in a remote suburban area, where high-quality elderly education resources are generally scarce and fragmented. (2) The 'stranger society' issue: On the macro level, urban residents in China are undergoing a transformation in social identity from 'organizational persons' to 'social persons' [7], and the urban grassroots governance model is correspondingly shifting from 'organizational governance' to 'social governance' [8] On the individual level, the identity change associated with 'retirement,' compounded by the spatial and social network transitions of moving to H Subdistrict to take care of grandchildren's education, has led to a rapid shift for the 'active elderly' group in H Subdistrict from 'organizational persons' to 'community persons.' As a result, the 'active elderly' group in H Subdistrict has a high enthusiasm for participating in community affairs. Moreover, to enrich their retired life, this group has an urgent demand for community elderly education and possesses considerable potential for 'grassroots' driven coproduction of public services [9]. However, due to the high proportion of non-local residents and the short establishment period of H Subdistrict, there is a lack of familiarity between street and community workers and residents. Residents have yet to establish trust in street and community workers, and these workers lack 'leverage' for conducting grassroots governance work, making the establishment of effective communication channels an urgent need.

This case study revolves around the establishment of a college for the elderly at the street level (shared by various communities) in H Subdistrict, which was newly established from scratch. The case description unfolds primarily in three aspects: the construction process and the multi-party interactions involved, the sustainable operation mechanism and its effectiveness—namely, the organic coupling of 'cost-reducing and efficiency-increasing' public services, the achievement of good grassroots governance, and the enhancement of residents' sense of gain.

2.1. Resident-driven and subdistrict directed

The establishment of the Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict originated from dance troupes, choirs, and other organizations spontaneously formed by elderly residents within several communities. The 'initiators' of these community interest groups are typically the 'cultural backbone' of the community. Taking the dance troupe of Community J as an example, its 'initiator' had just retired from a professional institution's labor union and moved to Community J in H Subdistrict for the purpose of helping to look after the child. However, these 'cultural backbones' often feel a sense of 'meaninglessness' due to the lack of familiar neighbors and the free time that comes with recent retirement. Driven by this sense of 'meaninglessness,' the 'cultural backbones' spontaneously organize and form small-scale interest groups. Members of such groups are also the main participants in the occasional elderly education activities held by the community. In the process of participating in activities organized by the community and the subdistrict office, their demand for systematic and sustained community elderly education is further stimulated, and is articulated through the community's need for cultural performances. Led by the 'cultural backbone' elderly residents, the initial establishment of the Silver-Aged College was propelled forward, and throughout the establishment process, they provided assistance and pressure to the subdistrict office, thereby participating in the decision-making for the establishment of the Silver-Aged College: 'Teacher L, who came from the Open University to give us lectures before, was very good. She was a professional match and patient. I started taking classes with her afterwards. Once I asked her if she could come to our community to give lectures more often. I saw that she was quite willing, so I mentioned it to Little Y (a subdistrict office worker) to see if we could have her come regularly to our community for classes.' (C1,2023-11-23) In contrast to previous community elderly education initiatives, the community elderly education in this case does not proceed purely in a top-down manner. Instead, it is driven and propelled from the bottom up by residents based on their needs, even participating in the decision-making process of community elderly education development.

Against this backdrop, there is a concurrent top-down policy pressure and a bottom-up demand pressure on one end of the street. Constrained by financial support, H Subdistrict staff prioritize the use and development of existing resources, seeking cooperation with the Open University they have communicated with before: 'The connection with them (the Open University) was established during a previous joint organization of party-building activities.'(G1,2023-11-14) Open universities are typically sponsored by local governments and overseen by local education departments, with the founding philosophy of 'facing the grassroots, facing the community, and widely carrying out worker education, community education, elderly education...' and the responsibility to 'enhance the educational level and quality of elderly education'. 'Our open university's elderly education segment has always been centered on serving the lifelong learning of all citizens. With the advantages of remote education technology, resources, and systematic school operation, it can be said that the teaching and expansion of the open university itself are two sides of the same coin as promoting community education and elderly education.' (U1, 2023-11-29) The street office, through signing a framework agreement with the open university, has preliminarily established the prototype of a community elderly university, and has taken the lead in various affairs after signing the agreement, including course preference collection, venue allocation, schedule arrangement, and publicity and management work.

2.2. Establishing a platform to integrate fragmented resources

The Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict is not a physical 'college', but rather an elderly education platform that uses community party-mass service centers as venues, employs professional teachers from the open university, and has enrolled elderly individuals as regular students, encompassing the three elements of community education (venue, educators, and learners) [10]. Its prominent feature is the integration of fragmented elderly education resources, achieving coproduction of community elderly education public services with the participation of diverse actors. (Figure 1)
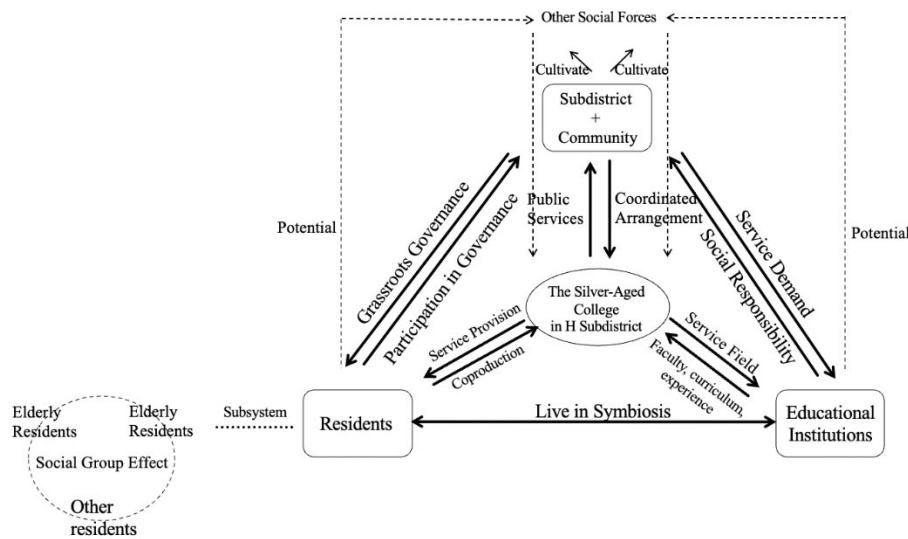

Figure 1: The Coproduction of Community Elderly Education Public Services with the Participation of Diverse Actors

The subdistrict office and community, with overall planning as their primary responsibility, were initially involved in the specific management affairs of the Silver-Aged College. As the operation of the Silver-Aged College gradually became standardized and regularized, the subdistrict office introduced student entrepreneurial teams as social forces to participate in the specific management of the Silver-Aged College, further reducing the burden on grassroots work. The Open University has injected professional teaching staff into the Silver-Aged College of H Subdistrict and provided advanced management experience in community elderly education to the subdistrict and community. Residents, while receiving elderly education services provided by the community, have established closer connections with street and community workers due to the overlap of the party-mass service center and community staff. They provide suggestions for the improvement of the Silver-Aged College on a daily basis and facilitate the development of community cultural activities. In addition, residents and educational institutions, as potential social forces, continue to empower the Silver-Aged College of H Subdistrict. For example, Teacher G, who teaches choral classes at the Silver-Aged College, is a transformation from a resident.

2.3. Low-cost operation

Like other grassroots governments, H Subdistrict does not have dedicated financial funds for community elderly education. However, through the coproduction involving diverse actors, the Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict has achieved 'cost reduction and efficiency increase' in the provision of elderly education public services. The main source of funding for the Silver-Aged College comes from the tuition fees paid by the students, but these fees are merely nominal and extremely low (Table 1).

Table 1: H Subdistrict Silver-Aged University Fee Schedule

Age	Tuition Fees	Remarks
Ages 50 and above (born before January 1, 1974)	160 yuan for 16 classes	The choral class consists of 8 sessions, with a tuition fee of 80 yuan
Under 50 years of age (born after December 31, 1973)	200 yuan for 16 classes	The choral class consists of 8 sessions, with a tuition fee of 100 yuan
Not a resident of H Subdistrict's community (regardless of age)	240 yuan for 16 classes	The choral class consists of 8 sessions, with a tuition fee of 120 yuan

However, due to economies of scale (with an average class size of about 30 people), the tuition fees paid by the students currently fully cover the daily operation costs of the Silver-Aged College (mainly teacher's hourly fees and teaching facilities). This is mainly due to the low-cost operation of the Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict. On one hand, the largest investment in community elderly education—venue space—has achieved a 'zero' accounting cost for venue fees through the rational allocation of the use of various community party-mass service centers by H Subdistrict staff. On the other hand, the Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict has fully mobilized 'active elderly' to deeply integrate into community grassroots governance, encouraging most elderly students to participate in community volunteer services, micro-project renovations, and other projects. This not only meets the 'active elderly' expectations of 'productive aging' and brings them a sense of honor but also saves costs for the community in other governance projects.

3. The Mechanisms of Coproduction in Community Elderly Education

Based on the connotation of coproduction in community elderly education, the aforementioned case demonstrates five important driving and operational mechanisms to facilitate the smooth progress of coproduction: the party-building leadership mechanism, the informal leadership mechanism, the spatial production mechanism, the community network mechanism, and the value cocreation mechanism.

3.1. The party-building leadership mechanism

The cooperative framework agreement reached between the Silver-Aged College of H Subdistrict and the Open University prioritizes the enhancement of party-building communication as the primary content of cooperation: 'Both sides establish a party-building alliance, create a working deliberation mechanism, hold regular deliberation meetings, and exchange experiences in party-building work. In conjunction with significant national and political events, joint organizational activities are carried out, and the dissemination of the party's theoretical policies is exchanged. A mechanism for the interconnection, intercommunication, and interaction of party member training is established, innovative development of party organization construction is carried out, the leading role of party-building is leveraged, and a strong fortress of struggle is solidified.' (H Subdistrict and Open University Joint Construction Agreement) Grassroots party organizations possess authority in community governance and can often build a platform for diverse-actors cooperation and dialogue by convening joint meetings that gather various forces [11]. It can be said that the party-building leadership mechanism has provided the cornerstone for the subdistrict and educational institutions to break down divisions and achieve cooperation.

3.2. The informal leadership mechanism

The impetus for the establishment of the Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict stems from the elderly residents' urgent need for high-quality community elderly education services. This demand, which gains

attention from the community and the subdistrict through a bottom-up approach, is significantly influenced by the 'critical minority.' In the aforementioned case, dance troupes and choirs spontaneously organized by residents, whose initiators, through their status as 'cultural backbones,' became the informal leaders driving the initial supply of coproduction. On one hand, these informal leaders have an extensive 'mass base,' enabling them to mobilize all elderly residents for active participation. On the other hand, these informal leaders maintain close contact with street and community workers, being able to convey demands proactively and take the lead in connecting diverse actors.

3.3. The spatial production mechanism

Space is not merely a passive backdrop or container, but rather a producer imbued with ideology and social relations of production [12]. The Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict is not a teaching institution that solely occupies physical space; instead, it ingeniously utilizes existing spaces and resources, achieving both the goal of cost reduction and the smooth functioning of information transmission mechanisms.

The Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict has reduced the costs associated with the implementation of community elderly education by spatially coupling the classroom spaces for students with the office spaces for staff at the Party-Mass Service Center. This approach has allowed for a greater allocation of funds towards the development of high-quality teaching resources, achieving the 'cost reduction and efficiency increase' in the public services of community elderly education. Concurrently, the spatial coupling has facilitated informational coupling, enabling elderly students to participate extensively in the design and evaluation phases of the coproduction of public services for community elderly education.

3.4. The community network mechanism

The sustainable and effective diver-actors coproduction at the Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict is greatly facilitated by the social network of elderly students. Through the process of interaction with the street community staff, the elderly students have gradually established trust, thereby compensating for the 'stranger society' issue that arises from the short establishment period of H Subdistrict and the high number of non-local residents. Based on their own social networks, word-of-mouth promotion among elderly residents has brought strong publicity to the elderly college, and at the same time, it can lead to the exploration and investment of new resources and new actors. It can be seen that the elderly students, in a subtle way, influence other residents through social effects, thereby enhancing the willingness of the entire community to participate in the coproduction of public services.

3.5. The value cocreation mechanism

Due to the emphasis on the crucial role of elderly residents in coproduction by the Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict, the concept of active aging has been fundamentally implemented. In traditional views, the elderly are often seen as a group in need of care [13]. However, the Silver-Aged College in H Subdistrict encourages the active participation of the elderly in learning and social interaction through courses and practical activities, redefining the role and value of the elderly. Here, the elderly can not only enhance their skills and enrich their later life but also contribute to the community through means such as 'younger elderly assisting older elderly' and serving as 'micro-grid officers,' thereby further enhancing their sense of self-efficacy. It is also worth noting that H Subdistrict effectively uses 'symbolic' methods to enhance the elderly residents' sense of honor and belonging to the community: serving as 'micro-grid officers' or 'H Subdistrict partners' will be awarded with 'letters of appointment' and 'exquisite peripherals' (vests, canvas bags, hats, water cups, etc.) issued by the street office, and will be recognized and publicized on the street's official WeChat account. This aligns with the elderly students' concept of 'productive aging,' enabling them to shine in community governance. In addition, arrangements such as representing the street in cultural performances and competitions, and earning points through volunteer service hours to exchange for courses at the elderly college vividly reflect that H Subdistrict has achieved a transformation in concepts, attempting to deepen coproduction through a value cocreation mechanism.

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