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## Sense of Social Responsibility: The Connotation and the Denotation

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### Abstract

Sense of social responsibility is an important issue about which the academics have conducted extensive theoretical exploration and practical research. However, so far the concept of sense of social responsibility is not unified. The academic search results about this issue are isolated from each other and independent, and they even conflict with each other. This research is to clarify and redefine social responsibility based on studies on this concept and to analyze the connotation and denotation of sense of social responsibility.

**Key words:** Society; Responsibility; Sense of social responsibility

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### INTRODUCTION

Discussion on the topic of responsibility is timeless. Since we enter a modern society, it is an unavoidable key topic which has been researched in depth. Responsibilities are directly related to the orderly and healthy development of the country as well as the healthy and happy life of people. “Responsibility” has already widely penetrated into every

corner of society. As an independent individual in modern society, when we are enjoying the rights that our country has been granted, we should bear the corresponding responsibilities and obligations. In recent years, with the rapid economic development in China, industries are gradually upgraded and industrial structures have begun to transit; therefore, the demand of high-quality talents is increasing. The necessity and importance of the cultivation of individual’s sense of social responsibility are unquestionable.

The “national medium and long-term educational reform and development plan” released in 2010 expressly proposed that, “When cultivating socialist qualified builders and reliable successors who are morally, intelligently and physically well developed, the key is to improve students’ sense of social responsibility of “serving the country and serving the people’ and their ability of innovation and solving problems.” The Minister of Education, Mr. Yuan Rengui also pointed out that,

in the past, when we talked about quality-oriented education, mostly we emphasized on two points, i.e. innovative spirit and practical ability. This time it expressly pointed out, beside these two points, there is another one, and it is sense of social responsibility. That refers to the moral character which emphasizes the sense of social responsibility of “enriching the country and enriching the people.

The communique of the Third Plenary Session of 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee pointed out “to fully implement the Party’s educational policy, adhere to strengthening morality, strengthen the education of socialist core value system, improve the education of excellent traditional Chinese culture, form the effective forms and long-term mechanism of loving learning, working and the country, and enhance students’ sense of social responsibility, innovative spirit and practical ability.” This was the first time that at a national level the cultivation of sense of social responsibility had been put in a primary position in quality-oriented education, from which we can see its core

position. The topic about sense of social responsibility has also caused extensive theoretical exploration and practical research in the academic field. However, in many researches, mostly researchers start from the current situation of sense of social responsibility and analyze the reason why sense of social responsibility weakens or propose cultivation strategies; however, they ignore the definition of “sense of social responsibility” so that there is not a commonly accepted understanding of the connotation of sense of social responsibility in the academic field. A number of researches are independent from each other and some of them are even in conflict with each other. Therefore, this research tends to review the understanding of “sense of social responsibility”, analyze problems that might have the definition of sense of social responsibility, and then propose a clear and comprehensive definition of “sense of social responsibility”. This research tends to correct some bias of the common-sense understanding of this concept and provide references for the subsequent exploration of educational theory and practice.

## 1. ANALYSIS OF THE CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS OF THE CONCEPT OF SENSE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

When we talk about sense of social responsibility, basically no one would think that it is hard to understand. It is true that our daily life, study and work are related to sense of social responsibility in some way. We can just blurt out a number of examples related to sense of social responsibility in our daily life, such as “I have filial piety to my parents”, “I never cross a red light”, “I deal with trash in their category”, “I pay taxes according to the law”, and “I do my work rigorous” and so on. Are all these the performance of sense of social responsibility? I am afraid it is not that simple. When we understand the concept of sense of social responsibility, we need to break through conventional ways to conduct in-depth analysis and clarification. There are various understandings of “sense of social responsibility” from different scholars. This research will start from the three key words, “sense”, “social”, and “responsibility”, to understand and analyze what sense of social responsibility is.

### 1.1 What Does “Social” Mean in “Sense of Social Responsibility”?

This question relates to the boundary of sense of social responsibility. Some researchers believe that, “Sense of social responsibility as a moral emotion, mainly refers to the attitude of responsibilities, tasks and missions that an independent social member takes to the country, the group and others.” (Jiang, 2004) In this statement, “social” in the sense of social responsibility refers to “the country, the group and others” and it is a self-exclusive social concept.

There is another broad understanding of sense of social responsibility, which believes that self-responsibility is an expression of social responsibility and sense of social responsibility is a comprehensive performance which contains individual responsibility. (Duan, 2000) There is also another blurring “social” understanding, which believes that “sense of social responsibility refers to the attitude of social responsibilities and missions that capable people take on towards others and the society under certain historical context” (Wang & Sun, 2006). In the above statements, social either represents “the country, the group and others” or “the country, group, others and oneself”, or directly ignores specific description of the “society”. As we all know, sense of social responsibility must have a clear referent object. In statements, “I have filial piety to my parents” and “I never cross red lights”, the referent objects of sense of social responsibility in them respectively are “family” and “public order” and they are specific microcosms of the society. When we talk about “I love myself” and “I am responsible to my family”, do “myself” and “family” belong to society? When we mention “others”, “group” and “the country” in statements like “I help others”, “I unite the group”, and “I love my country”, do they belong to “society”? If we do not clarify the border of “society” in sense of social responsibility, I am afraid our understanding of sense of social responsibility is still blurring and ambiguous.

The academic field divides the type of responsibilities according to the referent object of responsibilities and it provides us with a positive reference. Giuseppe Mazzini divides responsibilities into responsibilities to oneself, to one’s family, to the country, and to the human beings and so on (Mazzini, 1997). Chinese scholar Hu Wei divides responsibilities into seven categories according to the specific content of “learning to be responsible” and it is the responsibility to oneself, to one’s family, to others, to the group, to the country, to the human beings, and to the ecological environment (Hu, 1994). Montada divides responsibilities into social responsibilities and individual responsibilities. “Being responsible to others means caring of others; when it becomes voluntary or exceptional, it usually is called social responsibility.” “Individual responsibilities refer to people’s responsibilities to their behavior and its consequence, and it is manifested in the way of offense and dereliction of duty (Montadal, 2001). In the research results of the category division of these responsibilities, we understand that sense of responsibilities should be divided into responsibilities to oneself and to others. Others refer to the “society” that we understand from a common sense, including “others”, “the group”, “the country”, and “the human beings”. However, Marx once said, “The essence of men, in terms of reality, is the sum of social relations.” This statement clarifies in depth the interdependent relationship between men and men as well as men and the society. The essential attribute

of human beings lies in their society attribute. In reality, individuals are closely related to the society and it is hard to separate them. Now in modern society, it is difficult to distinguish private and public areas. In this sense, it is different from traditional society. Now the degree of integration of individuals and the society is getting higher and higher and deeper and deeper. If one is not responsible for oneself and is indifferent to their family, then he is irresponsible in the society as well. If everyone is like that, the society will be in danger of disintegration. Based on this, we believe that the society in sense of social responsibility should include “oneself” and “others”, referring to the integration of “mankind, the country, the group, others, family, and oneself”. It is especially true under the Chinese cultural context.

### 1.2 What Is the connotation of “Responsibility” in Sense of Social Responsibility?

This question involves the clarity and integrity of the content of responsibility and it is crucial for us to understand and practice sense of social responsibility. What does “responsibility” in sense of social responsibility refer to? Legal liability? Moral responsibility? Economic responsibility? Professional responsibility? Political responsibility? Technical responsibility? Or responsibility in all fields? In the above description of the concept of sense of social responsibility, the content of responsibility is expressed as: social moral responsibilities, obligations, tasks, and missions and so on. Do these stand for comprehensive and complete content that sense of social responsibility refers to? I am afraid they do not. There is one point for sure: sense of responsibility or sense of social responsibility refers to a positive and initiative internal physiological state when an individual accepts responsibilities and it is self-disciplined; However, responsibility emphasizes on tasks and obligations as well as punishment due to irresponsible and it has external binding and heteronomy. Therefore, when the subject takes on the sense of social responsibility, he must be self-disciplined; otherwise, he just takes on tasks or obligations rather than sense of responsibility. For example, the subject is taking on tasks or obligation when he is “supporting children and parents” or “paying taxes” or “finish working tasks”. Those are responsibilities that he has to take according to the law of corresponding regulations. We can put these under the category of system responsibilities. Sense of social responsibility is different from them, and it should be moral responsibility. It is a moral responsibility which an individual takes on in any system or under any binding power.

### 1.3 What “Sense” Is It in Sense of Social Responsibility?

Some scholars take the sense of social responsibility as an attitude or emotional psychological experience; while some scholars describe it as an emotion or a

psychological quality that conscious awareness and will and so on react to social responsibility. Although there are various formats that scholars have described, they all are involved in understanding what “sense” it is in the sense of social responsibility from the psychological state. Sense of responsibility is a broader concept of sense of social responsibility. Before clarifying sense of social responsibility, let’s discuss sense of responsibility first. Sense of responsibility is usually defined as a positive attitude or emotional experience. This is recognized in the academic field. Some representative definitions include “sense of responsibility refers to the attitude towards things and obligations that social members, as independent individuals, should do” (Liu, 2001), “sense of responsibility is experience of attitude” (Zhang & Ma, 1999), “sense of responsibility is the positive and initiative experience of attitude towards one’s obligations and responsibilities” (Sun, Mou, & Li, 1996). In the *Dictionary of Psychology*, compiled by Professor Lin Chongde, “sense of responsibility” is defines as: “the emotional experience that is produced when individuals have a positive and responsible attitude while conducting moral tasks” (Lin, Yang, & Huang, 2003). With reference to the definition of “sense of responsibility”, we think that sense of social responsibility is the attitude or emotional experience that individuals have when positively conducting their social responsibilities.

## 2. THE CONNOTATION AND DENOTATION OF SENSE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Based on the comprehensive analysis, we think the **connotation of “sense of social responsibility” is: in the absence of any system or power constrained, individuals’ attitude or emotional experience to a certain thing that they choose to actively accomplish for themselves, their family, others, their group, their country and mankind.**

Specifically, the denotation of “sense of social responsibility” contains the following limits.

### 2.1 The Subject of Sense of Social Responsibility

**Sense of social responsibility is “individual” rather than “collective” responsibility.** When we talk about responsibility and sense of responsibility, no one would deny that there are other organisms except for human beings as their subjects. In this sense, we can say that responsibility, sense of responsibility or sense of social responsibility is an important attribute of human beings as human beings and it is an essential rule to distinguish with other life existences. Then, is the “human being” who takes on this sense of social responsibility a certain individual, or a group, organization, government or even

the country? Broadly speaking, any group or organization can be the subject who takes on the responsibility or might become the subject who takes on the sense of social responsibility. Just like we often comment in our daily life that some companies have the sense of social responsibility, companies can be the subject of sense of social responsibility. This point of view has been confirmed in the academic field. When discussing the classification of responsibilities, some scholars start from the subject of responsibilities and divide them into seven categories and they are individual responsibility, family responsibility, civic responsibility, professional responsibility, public servant responsibility, community responsibility, and society responsibility (Cheng, 1994). However, we believe that sense of social responsibility is the product based on various responsible relationships and its actions always embodies a certain responsible relationship. Although collective sense of social responsibility cannot be considered as the simple sum of individuals' sense of responsibility, the action of groups or organizations to take on social responsibilities must be manifested by the specific action of each individual in the group or organization. The subject who takes on the social responsibility must be an individual, but sometimes it is manifested in the name of the group or organization. Therefore, this research studies individual social responsibility in society rather than the social responsibility of groups or organizations.

**We need to add that the “social individual” is an individual with subjectivity.** The most important feature of subjectivity is autonomy. Here it means that the individual has the right to choose whether to conduct the responsibility. A significant feature of human moral activities is that humans have the ability to make a choice for their actions and this produces humans' sense of moral responsibility (Li, 1990). Do those who are mentally incompetent have moral responsibility? Such as infants or people who have mental illness or dementia. They cannot make a choice whether to practice certain actions. In their social life, there are more actions which are lack of subjectivity due to out of the control of their intellect or rationality or without possibility of choice. Sense of social responsibility is the experience and feeling when individuals with subjectivity feel free to choose to practice moral responsibility. Only when an individual has the freedom to choose to practice or take on the responsibility can such individual be called qualified with sense of social responsibility. In another word, “sense of social responsibility” must be based on responsible subject with subjectivity. Without autonomy, there is no so-called sense of responsibility or “ense of social responsibility. Autonomy and freedom are concomitant with responsibility. About this, Hegel has a brilliant claim: “People’s determination is their own activity. It is based on their free and it is also their responsibility” (Hegel,

1982). Due to rapid social changes which have brought a series of changes in the economy, politics, and cultural life, the social responsibility system that we are faced with is becoming bigger and bigger and there comes differentiation. Diversified value orientation has subverted the traditional and relatively single standard of value; therefore, individuals have more and more freedom when making a choice and individuals' requirement of subjectivity continues to increase, which also results in the increasing of the connotation of responsibility. Without freedom, responsibility cannot be produced. Freedom, autonomy and responsibility are associated with one another and they also restraint one another. “Freedom and autonomy are the foundation and essential premise of responsibility; without freedom, there is no responsibility. The degree of freedom is closely related to the quantity of responsibility” (Lu & Wang, 2000). In this sense, if we put all individuals in all forms under the subject to take on social responsibility, it is obvious inappropriate. Only when those individuals with freedom and autonomy are conducting their responsibility can we call it sense of social responsibility; otherwise they are just conducting the requirements of the system and the provisions of the context.

## 2.2 The Nature of Sense of Social Responsibility

**Sense of social responsibility is a self-disciplined rather than heteronomous sense of responsibility.** Some scholars have made a classic statement regarding moral responsibility:

Moral responsibility refers to obligations constrained by public opinions, traditions and inner heart beliefs and moral condemnations due to moral negligence. Its characteristic is to pay the price voluntarily, such as parents' attentive upbringing to their children. Obviously, it is a basic requirement that one should fulfill his legal liability; on this basis, those who are voluntarily taking on moral responsibility are rea responsible people. (Shen, 2001)

From this we can see that, one important difference of moral responsibility from non-moral responsibility is its self-discipline. It is the responsible subject who actively fulfills his responsibility and it is an awareness of individual morality. It is the subject's commitment to his moral choice and its consequence. The common feature of non-moral responsibility such as political responsibility, economic responsibility and professional responsibility lies in “must or should do something”. It is the fulfillment of obligations that one “has to take on at his position”. It is the system responsibility based on specific position; therefore this non-moral responsibility is heteronomous. The responsibility might change or adjust according to the change of “position” or “role”. The degree of the responsibility or whether to fulfill it is directly closed to the change of outside conditions. It has no relation to individual's inner moral awareness. An individual with real sense of social responsibility has the sense to actively take on responsibilities no matter what the conditions are.



This kind of responsibility is moral responsibility and it is self-disciplined.

### 2.3 The Development Characteristics of Sense of Social Responsibility

**The motivation of sense of social responsibility is the unification of self-love and altruism.** To further analyze the motivation to fulfill social responsibility, we need to ask: are all forms of self-disciplined responsible actions the performance of sense of social responsibility? If the motivation of fulfilling a certain responsibility is purely for one's selfish desire, does it count for real sense of social responsibility? For example, a famous corporate donated a huge amount of money for disaster relief. This fits the behavior of moral responsibility. However, what if its motivation is to attract public attention and expand the campaign so as to achieve material interests? This kind of behavior whose result seems fitting moral responsibility but its motivation is for private interest or other material benefit is not moral responsibility; of course it is not sense of social responsibility. In an individual's practice of fulfilling social responsibility, in addition to his own inner needs, there should not be any external utilitarian demands. If we call those actions which are driven by inherent interest and show as moral responsibility morality, this is a paradox, because the motivation of such actions is not moral at all and do not meet the requirement of moral responsibility. However, we need to note that, moral responsibility does not mean that it can only be altruistic. Self-love and non-selfish motivation of responsibility is still the achievement of moral responsibility. The "society" in the above mentioned sense of social responsibility also includes oneself. Individuals are members of the society. Only when one loves oneself and develops oneself and achieve one's own dreams through hard work can the society achieve sustainable healthy development. Basically this is a reflection of good sense of social responsibility. However, in the motivation of fulfilling one's own responsibility, we emphasize "self-love" rather than "selfishness" and the reason is to prevent "self-love" from becoming the cause to hurt others or cause others' misfortune. In the "charitable action" of a famous corporate donating a huge amount of money to disaster relief, if this "charitable action" is driven by the development of the company so as to achieve the satisfaction of material interests, is this a motivation of "self-love"? In the context of market economy, this company unjustly achieves its development at the expense of sacrificing others' possible development opportunities. This motivation which seems "self-love" is essentially "selfish" and it is for the self-realization to serve itself at the expense of sacrificing others' interests. Therefore, we believe that, sense of social responsibility is "self-love" and it is the fulfillment of moral responsibility based on the individual's own efforts and

meanwhile without prejudice to others' interests; or it is "altruistic" and it is the fulfillment of responsibility with the purpose to achieve public welfare. Any other responsibility fulfillment under the name of morality for utilitarian realization cannot be called to have the "sense of social responsibility".

**The formation of sense of social responsibility is the unification of emotion and rationality.** Needless to say, sense of social responsibility, as a basic moral sense, is not naturally available when one is born. It is acquired with rational cultivation. A whining baby does not have the so-called sense of social responsibility; however, compassion is an innate psychological quality and it is a psychological reaction which appears when you resonate emotionally to others' detrimental situation or behavior. Modern psychology has confirmed:

Empathy is a congenital altruistic motivation system. People have conducted studies on 3 or 4 hour-old babies and two-day-old babies and the study indicates that newborn babies have stronger reaction to the cry of other babies than to other sounds with the same tone and same volume. (Carroll & Rest, 1982)

This indicates that compassion is derived from human instinct. Even babies who do not have self-consciousness have compassion. As people's social level continues to increase, people's compassion will develop from a human's instinct level to a higher level of social compassion. The realization of this process obviously relies on the acquired rational cultivation. When individuals with a sense of social responsibility produce a moral responsibility motivation, they will self-consciously observe the object's encountering and situation and psychologically imagine and experience the object's feelings so that emotional compassion and sympathy will be caused. Based on the emotional sympathy, individuals are likely to choose to conduct the moral responsibility. In our daily, most of us would have no hesitation to "give the seat to the senior and pregnant women". This is a manifestation of the most basic sense of social responsibility and it is an action of kindness due to basic compassion and sympathy. The story of the "most beautiful mother", Wu Juping, has touched the world in 2011. When seeing a two-year-old girl falling, this young mother rushed over with her hands to catch the girl. The girl was safe and sound, but the young mother has serious fractures. There was no time for the "most beautiful mother" to think whether it was safe to catch the girl when she chose to "catch" the girl. She did this because of her motherly compassion and sympathy and it is an aprioristic instinctive reaction. However, does this mean that with compassion and sympathy, we would always choose to do kind things and conduct responsibilities under any circumstances? The answer is no. The issue is regarding "whether to help a senior when seeing his falling" has aroused widespread discussion in recent years. It is a reflection of the helplessness of modern people in how

to choose to practice sense of social responsibility. It also reflects that sense of social responsibility cannot only rely on feelings and it also requires rationality. With the frequency of modern information updates growing faster and faster, “money worship”, “utilitarian” and “individualism” have constantly challenged the human moral bottom line. How to practice moral responsibility rationally has become a practical question that a modern citizen with a sense of social responsibility urgently needs to reflect. Faced with the above issue of “whether to help a falling senior”, rational passers-by would observe, analyze and make a judgment and then make a choice. They can get evidence and find a witness in advance and then help the senior. In modern society, “courageous actions” relying on feelings have been abandoned by more and more people because of the possible adverse consequences, but “wise actions” will gradually become the mainstream when people practice the sense of social responsibility.

**The content of sense of social responsibility is the unification of history and reality.** With the development of economy and the change of social structure, the content of moral responsibility corresponded to sense of social responsibility has also shown features of the corresponding era. In short, “morality” is the evaluation criteria of kindness and evil and it changes as the change of social history. “Loyalty to the emperor” was a golden rule in the value system in ancient China and it was a value standard that you could not choose but just follow. “Traacherous officials” obviously offended justice and they should be put to death. However, today, citizens firmly resist improper behavior of the country is a specific manifestation of the individual’s responsibility to the country. It is especially true for free love in China. In the ancient China, the most important virtue for women was “chastity”; however, in modern society, it has been dissolved. Now other virtues such as “independence”, “self-reliance”, “self-esteem”, and “Self-love”, etc. have been given a richer connotation of the times. Even in the same era, the content of sense of social responsibility in China is different from that in other countries. For example, regarding “no spitting”, it is a matter of moral responsibility which is followed consciously by individuals with a good sense of social responsibility. However, in Western countries, it is a legal responsibility and then it is not about social responsibility at all. This kind of difference also reflects the cultural differences in sense of social responsibility. The cultural study of the East and the West finds that, “In western culture, people tend to take themselves as an independent individual and a exclusive presence; in eastern culture, people usually take themselves as the product of individual interacting with society” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Some scholars are studying the responsibility in culture point out that, “responsibility will inevitably be engraved

with the region’s unique cultural imprint and indicates typical cultural dependence” (Ren, 2008). Therefore, the responsibility in western cultural background does not really encourage conducting social responsibility. It mainly manifests as the contractual liability which is centered around self-responsibility; while in traditional Chinese culture, we emphasize social responsibility as “the country’s rise and fall is everyone’s responsibility” and “worry people first and enjoy after people enjoy first” and we also stress individual’s responsibility to the development of others and the society as well as the self-discipline of responsibility. Maybe because of the influence of traditional collectivist culture, research on responsibility in China mainly focuses on sense of social responsibility. The content of sense of social responsibility continues to develop in modern society’s highly differentiated social division of labor and change in the evolution of public and private sector. In different historical period and in different cultural environments and geographies in the same historical period, it has a very different connotation.

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