Synergy of Empowerment and Support: A Case Study of Theoretical Integration in Disability Social Work

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Abstract: Although empowerment and social support are core theories in social work, their dynamic co-constructive mechanisms within specific cultural practices remain under-explored. This study uses the "Xinhua Yi" disability social work project in Community C, Kunming, China, a s a qualitative case to investigate how empowerment theory and social support theory integrate and generate synergistic effects within a Chinese urban context. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 13 participants, participatory observation of six group sessions, and analysis of practice documentation, organized using thematic analysis. Findings reveal that the integration of these theories is not a simple superposition but forms a "virtuous cycle of empowerment-support": The secure, accepting social support environment established in the group's early stages serves as a crucial prerequisite for stimulating individuals' willingness and courage to empower themselves. Conversely, the confidence and capabilities gained through empowerment enable individuals to transition from "recipients of assistance" to "helpers," thereby reinforcing and strengthening the social support network. This creates a dynamic reciprocal system. This study proposes a process-oriented theoretical integration model, emphasizing the foundational role of social support as the "social soil" for empowerment within a relationship- and group-oriented cultural context. The findings offer significant theoretical and practical implications for localizing and innovating global social work theories in similar settings.

Keywords: Empowerment Theory; Social Support Theory; Disability; Social Work Practice; Qualitative Case Study

1. Introduction

China has achieved remarkable progress in promoting human rights and social development, with advancements in disability affairs serving as a key manifestation. In recent years, driven by the deepening implementation of national strategies such as the "14th Five-Year Plan for the Protection and Development of Persons with Disabilities," the focus of China's disability work has shifted from providing basic livelihood security to higher-level promotion of social inclusion and comprehensive development. This transformation aligns with the core spirit of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and is an essential requirement for achieving common prosperity on the path of Chinese modernization. Against this backdrop, professional social work, as a vital tool for modern social governance and service delivery, carries great expectations. There is an urgent need to explore effective practice models that both meet the diverse needs of persons with disabilities and align with China's national conditions. A critical issue currently facing both academia and practice is how to creatively integrate internationally recognized social work theories with specific practices within the context of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This study uses the "Heart Blossom Benefit" project in Community C, Kunming City, Yunnan Province as a case study to explore this issue in depth. Guided by "empowerment theory" and "social support theory," the project was designed to respond to national policy calls by implementing targeted services for persons with disabilities at the community level. The core objective of this paper is to analyze how these theories are activated, adapted, and synergized within specific localized practices, thereby providing micro-level empirical reference for enriching China's indigenous social work knowledge system.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter systematically reviews the theoretical evolution and core issues within disability studies, focusing on existing research outcomes concerning the two key pathways of social support and empowerment. Through a critical appraisal of the existing literature, it establishes the theoretical

foundation for constructing the "empowerment + social support" analytical framework for this study.

2.1 Evolution of Disability Theory Perspectives: From Individual Models to Capability Frameworks

The theoretical paradigm of disability studies underwent a fundamental shift from the individual model to the social model. Early research predominantly followed the individual model, attributing disability to personal physiological or psychological deficits and emphasizing medical rehabilitation as the solution to individual problems (Yu Lian, 2018). This perspective faced academic criticism for neglecting social environmental factors. The emergence of the social model marked a significant paradigm shift. Zhuo Caiqin (2011) argued from a constructivist perspective that disability issues are products of specific sociocultural constructions. Solutions require deconstructing problem labels, altering societal perceptions, and reconstructing supportive institutions. This shift in focus from individual impairment to societal barriers provided theoretical support for the social inclusion of persons with disabilities. In recent years, scholars have explored more integrative theoretical frameworks. Yu Lian (2018) introduced Amartya Sen's "capability" perspective,arguing that disability fundamentally involves limitations on an individual's choice of "functional activities" . This framework transcends isolated focus on "impairment" or "barriers," shifting attention to expanding substantive freedom for persons with disabilities. It provides a direct theoretical foundation for this study's emphasis on "self-development capabilities."

2.2 Research Status of Social Support Systems

As a critical determinant of well-being and development for persons with disabilities, social support has been examined primarily through two dimensions: sources of support and support effectiveness. Regarding sources, the synergistic role of formal and informal support has garnered scholarly attention. Li Yanyan and Hou Zhenan (2022), adopting a welfare pluralism perspective, argue that the social support system for disability care services should encompass multiple stakeholders including families, communities, markets, and the state[2] . A comparative study by Liu Zuyun and Mao Xiaoping (2010) further revealed regional variations in social support sources, highlighting mainland Chinese persons with disabilities' greater reliance on family support[1] . These findings suggest that building social support networks within Chinese community contexts requires careful consideration of local cultural characteristics. Regarding support effectiveness, empirical research confirms the significant role of social support. Bennani et al. (2024) conducted exploratory research indicating that organizational, relational, and individual-level support are key factors influencing workplace socialization among persons with disabilities[3].Minitta et al. (2022) demonstrated through a study of rural self-help groups in India that peer support effectively enhances the economic status and social participation of persons with disabilities[4] . Wu et al. (2025) further validated the applicability of the PROMIS Social Support Scale among persons with disabilities, providing instrumental support for quantitative research on social support[5] .

2.3 Research Progress on Empowerment Pathways

Empowerment, as a crucial pathway for promoting the development of persons with disabilities, has been primarily explored at the individual and economic levels in existing research. At the individual level, Li Jing and Xie Wen (2021) demonstrated that, from an empowerment perspective, helping persons with disabilities recognize their potential and mobilize personal, family, and social resources is an effective approach to enhancing their capabilities[6]. This finding supports the design rationale of this study, which aims to stimulate participants' agency through group activities. At the economic level, economic empowerment is regarded as a key dimension of empowerment. Reports from relevant international conferences emphasize the transformative importance of economic empowerment for persons with disabilities[7] . Minitta et al. (2022) further confirmed that economic empowerment activities conducted through self-help groups effectively improve the livelihoods of members with disabilities. Recent research has begun attempting systematic integration of empowerment pathways. Verma et al. (2025) proposed the "Leadership-Driven CARE Model," emphasizing leadership's central role in coordinating resources and support[8] . This model offers new perspectives for considering social workers' roles within the "empowerment + social support" model.

2.4 Research Gaps and Positioning of This Study

In summary, existing research has provided rich

theoretical perspectives and practical evidence for the development of persons with disabilities through separate pathways of social support and empowerment. Literature indicates that social support systems are crucial safeguards for the well-being of persons with disabilities (e.g., Bennani et al., 2024; Minitta et al., 2022) , while empowerment serves as an effective pathway to promote their personal development and economic independence (e.g., Li Jing & Xie Wen, 2021; Verma et al., 2025) . Some studies have also attempted to propose integrated models (e.g., Verma et al., 2025's CARE model) . However, a significant gap exists: most studies tend to treat social support and empowerment as two parallel or sequential processes. For instance, research often focuses on how social support promotes empowerment or how empowerment leads to better support, yet fails to fully reveal how the two dynamically co-construct and shape each other in practical contexts. Specifically, existing literature has not sufficiently addressed: How are supportive relationships themselves activated and transformed by the empowerment process? How does an individual's role transition from "recipient" to "helper" fundamentally alter the nature of support networks? How does this interactive mechanism manifest uniquely in cultures emphasizing collectivity and relationality (such as China).This study aims to fill this gap. We conceptualize social support and empowerment not as simple tools and ends, but as a dialectical symbiosis. Grounded in in-depth analysis of Chinese practice cases, the core question is: How do empowerment and social support mutually catalyze each other within the dynamic process of social work group interventions, forming a self-reinforcing "virtuous cycle"? By addressing this question, this study not only seeks to validate the effectiveness of the integrative framework but also aims to reveal its intrinsic, process-oriented interactive mechanisms. This provides micro-level empirical evidence for the development of social work theory grounded in the Chinese cultural context.

3.Construction of the Theoretical Framework
Based on the literature review, this study constructs an integrated analytical framework of "empowerment + social support." This framework comprises three core dimensions:

3.1Social Support Foundation: Emphasizes creating safe, accepting environments to provide the psychosocial foundation for empowerment.

Drawing from Bennani et al.'s (2024) organizational support research and Minitta et al.'s (2022) peer support studies, it focuses on the process of constructing supportive relationships.

3.2 Pathways to Empowerment Realization:
Enhances individuals' self-efficacy and sense of control through skill training, resource linkage, and other methods. Drawing on Li Jing and Xie Wen's (2021) empowerment practices and Verma et al.'s (2025) systematic model, it designs multi-level intervention strategies.

3.3 Interactive Promotion Mechanism:
Exploring how social support and empowerment mutually catalyze each other to form a virtuous cycle. This dimension addresses the existing research limitation of insufficient attention to their dynamic interaction.
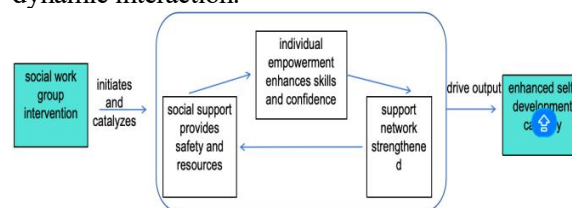
Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of Social Support and Empowerment Catalyzing Each Other to form a Virtuous Cycle

The innovation of this framework lies in: First, treating social support as the "social soil" where empowerment takes root, rather than merely an external tool; second, examining how empowerment in turn strengthens support networks to form reciprocal relationships; Finally, it employs process analysis to reveal the specific interactive mechanisms between the two within the Chinese community context. This framework will guide subsequent empirical analysis of the "Heart Flower Benefit" project, focusing on how "empowerment" and "social support" mutually reinforce each other in practice to jointly promote the self-development capabilities of persons with disabilities.

4. Project Implementation

4.1 Project Overview
The "Heart Blossom" project was implemented in Community C, a typical urban community in Kunming City, Yunnan Province. This community has actively explored grassroots governance and service innovation. Supported and coordinated by the community Party organization, the project was jointly carried out by a social work team from a local university and the community residents'

committee, serving as a model case of "university-community collaboration" in innovative community governance. The project received backing from local government policies related to persons with disabilities and effectively connected various community resources. The 13 recruited group members reflect the diversity of the disability community. Activities closely address needs for improved quality of life and social skills, translating national macro-policy objectives into tangible community services through platforms like handicraft training. This context demonstrates that the "Heart Blossom" project is a positive practice emerging from the synergistic interaction of national policy support, community platform hosting, and professional intervention.

Activities are held at the community activity center, primarily focusing on handicraft training (such as making handicrafts, weaving, and dried flower art), interspersed with team games, experience sharing, and showcase sessions. While the project's explicit goals are to enhance members' practical skills and social interaction, its underlying theoretical logic aligns with the dual objectives of empowerment and social support mentioned earlier. Data Collection and Analysis Methods Data collection strictly adhered to the multi-source triangulation principle of qualitative research, employing three primary methods:

In-depth Interviews: Following the conclusion of group activities, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 13 participants, averaging approximately 60 minutes each. Interview guides focused on participants' personal experiences, shifts in feelings within the group, relationships with fellow members and social workers, and changes in self-perceived capabilities. Additionally, interviews were conducted with two core social workers and one community coordinator to gather perspectives on program design and reflection.

Participatory Observation: The researcher participated as a facilitator throughout all six group sessions, maintaining detailed field notes. Key observation points included interaction patterns among members, nonverbal behaviors, critical events (e.g., conflicts, breakthrough moments), and the social workers' facilitation strategies.

Practice Documentation Analysis: Program design documents, social workers' process records, activity photographs, and selected members' handcrafted works from all six group sessions were collected and analyzed. These documents provided critical textual insights into the intervention's intended objectives and actual implementation.

4.2 Project Implementation

Research Findings: The Generative Mechanism of the Positive Cycle of Empowerment and Social Support. Thematic analysis of field data revealed that the integration of "empowerment" and "social support" within the "Heart Blossom" project was not a mechanical application of theoretical concepts, but rather a dynamic process that emerged organically and mutually reinforced within the practical context. This study identifies three sequential, critical mechanisms that initiate and sustain this "virtuous cycle," collectively forming a clear pathway for change.

Creating a Safe Haven: Social Support as the Emotional Foundation and Relational Prerequisite for Empowerment

During the early group sessions, members commonly exhibited anxiety about unfamiliar social settings and a lack of confidence in self-expression. As member Ms. Li (pseudonym) candidly shared: "I felt very uneasy the first time I came, afraid I wouldn't perform well, that others would laugh at me, and worried I'd hold the group back." Such concerns reveal the "learned helplessness" mindset that individuals with disabilities may develop under prolonged social exclusion. The project social worker keenly recognized this dynamic and prioritized creating a highly secure, inclusive, and emotionally supportive "relational container" as the primary intervention goal. Achieving this relied on a series of carefully designed micro-practices. The icebreaker game in the first session aimed to rapidly dissolve unfamiliarity among members; jointly establishing a group contract—"no criticism, more encouragement, keep secrets"—set supportive interaction norms at the rule level. More significantly, the social worker modeled positive attention and concrete affirmation for every small attempt made by participants—even imperfect ones. Field notes documented a typical scene: When a member with hand disabilities slowly but independently completed her first simple craft piece, the social worker not only guided the group in offering enthusiastic applause but also offered specific praise: "Aunt Zhang's patience and persistence are truly worthy of our learning." This action transcended simple encouragement; its deeper function was to shift the group's focus from judging the "outcome of the work" to recognizing the personal qualities demonstrated in the "process of attempting." This fundamentally reduced members' fear of "failure." At this stage, social

support primarily manifests as unconditional emotional acceptance and the provision of psychological safety. Establishing this "safe harbor" effectively alleviates members' initial anxieties, encouraging them to lower their psychological defenses. This lays an indispensable relational and emotional foundation for subsequent empowerment learning—a process demanding courage, risk-taking, and potentially accompanied by setbacks.

Thus, social support in this phase is not merely an auxiliary means of empowerment but its prerequisite. By reconstructing a non-judgmental micro-social environment, it prepares fertile "social soil" for the "germination" of individual agency, marking a fundamental shift from defensive isolation to open participation.

The "I Can Do It" Moment: The Emergence and Validation of Individual Competence Through Supportive Interaction

As the group progressed, the intervention naturally shifted its focus to skill acquisition and capacity building. The ingenuity of the project design lay in breaking down complex handicraft skills—such as weaving and dried flower art—into a series of achievable, incremental sub-tasks. This approach resonated with success theory principles, aiming to create abundant opportunities for members to experience "micro-successes." Upon completing each step, participants received immediate, visual positive reinforcement, steadily accumulating affirmations of "I can do this." Ms. Li's experience learning braiding encapsulates this process: "I just couldn't master that knot. My hands were weak, and I almost gave up. But Ms. Wang (the social worker) and Zhang (another group member) didn't rush me. They sat beside me the whole time, telling me to take my time. When I finally tied that knot, it felt like a light bulb went off in my head. I realized I wasn't so clumsy after all." This pivotal moment vividly illustrates the core mechanism of individual empowerment—the enhancement of self-efficacy. Notably, this emergence of efficacy doesn't occur in a vacuum but is deeply embedded within supportive relationships. The "companionship" provided by the social worker and peers offers essential instrumental support (skill guidance) and, more crucially, emotional support (encouragement and presence), making challenging tasks manageable. Individual success thus becomes a social achievement, rooted in personal effort yet inseparable from relational support. Field notes repeatedly documented the sense of accomplishment and pride radiating from members'

faces after independently completing projects. This positive experience, born from hands-on practice, constitutes the fundamental driving force behind the "inside-out" transformation emphasized by empowerment theory. It begins reshaping members' negative perceptions of their own capabilities, quietly facilitating a cognitive shift from "I can't do it" to "Maybe I can try" to "I did it."

The emergence and affirmation of individual efficacy signifies a substantive breakthrough in the empowerment process. The activation of members' intrinsic motivation not only solidifies the initially established social support networks but also subtly alters their role positioning within these networks. This shift builds the psychological capital and practical capacity necessary for their transition from being "recipients" of support to becoming "providers."

Activation and Expansion of Support Networks: Role Transformation from Recipients to Helpers and the Emergence of Reciprocity

By the mid-to-late stages of the group, the most striking change was a fundamental evolution in the nature of the social support network. It transformed from an initial "support-recipient" structure primarily initiated by social workers and characterized by one-way giving, into a dynamic ecosystem dominated by multidirectional, reciprocal support flows among members. A landmark event in this shift was the emergence of "peer teaching." For instance, young member Xiao Zhang (pseudonym), who learned quickly, took the initiative to sit beside Aunt Liu—a slower learner—and provide hands-on guidance after mastering dried flower crafting techniques. Observational records indicate that such spontaneous, peer-to-peer instrumental and emotional support has become increasingly common. More profoundly, the act of providing support itself constitutes a deeper form of empowerment for the supporter. In an interview, Xiao Zhang shared his feelings: "Before, others always helped me. I never imagined I could help Aunt Liu. Seeing her learn made me happier than learning myself. I felt useful, like I'm an 'expert' in this group too." These words reveal the highest level of empowerment—where individuals regain a sense of self-worth and control over their lives by becoming valuable contributors to others. This shift from "recipient" to "provider" carries revolutionary significance, breaking down the binary oppositions of "able-bodied/disabled" and "expert/client." It transforms support networks from static aid structures into dynamic, self-reinforcing virtuous

cycles fueled by member empowerment: individual empowerment sparks altruistic actions, which strengthen the support network, and this reinforced network creates new empowerment opportunities for both individuals and others. Here, social support and individual empowerment achieve true dialectical unity and symbiotic growth.

Thus, the dynamic, mutually constitutive "virtuous cycle" between social support and individual empowerment is fully revealed. Support networks gain intrinsic, sustainable growth momentum through member empowerment; conversely, member empowerment reaches new heights through role transformation (from recipient to provider), achieving simultaneous elevation of personal value and social connectedness—the ultimate goal of social work intervention.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that within the "Heart Flower Benefit" project, empowerment and social support are not merely means and ends but exist in a dialectical symbiotic relationship. This finding not only validates the effectiveness of integrative practice but also provides significant deepening and supplementation to existing theories, particularly the integrative frameworks that have gained prominence in recent years.

5.1 Emphasis on Process and Emotional Foundations

Deepening the Integrative Model A key theoretical contribution of this study lies in revealing the processual and emotional microfoundations of theoretical integration. In recent years, scholars have attempted to construct systematic integration models, such as the "Leadership-Driven CARE Model" proposed by Verma et al. (2025), which emphasizes leadership's central role in coordinating resources and support. Our findings align closely with this integration direction while further deepening its implications. Frameworks like the CARE Model provide a valuable static structure, identifying elements requiring integration. This study, through deep analysis of micro-level practice processes, reveals how these elements dynamically interact over time. Specifically, this case demonstrates that effective integration does not begin with leadership coordination or direct resource input, but rather with the deliberate cultivation of a supportive relational environment. The primary role of social workers is not that of "leaders," but rather "relationship artists," whose core task is to create a psychologically safe "social

soil." Only within such emotionally rich soil can the seeds of individual empowerment take root. This implies that emotional support serves as both the prerequisite and sustained driving force that initiates and permeates the entire empowerment process—not merely a parallel intervention dimension. Thus, this study complements integration models by emphasizing the temporal logic and emotional foundation of integration, highlighting that exceptional practice requires a profound understanding of the relative weight and interactive dynamics of support and empowerment across different intervention phases.

5.2 "Reciprocal Empowerment": Redefining the Nature of Support Networks The Findings of This Study Further Deepen Our Understanding of the Highest Level of Empowerment.

When persons with disabilities undergo a role shift from "recipients to providers," transforming from "consumers" to "producers" within support networks, this achieves a form of "reciprocal empowerment." This not only significantly enhances individuals' sense of self-worth (empowerment at the individual level) but also fundamentally alters the nature of support networks. Traditional perspectives on support networks often emphasize the supply and receipt of support. This study reveals how the empowerment process transforms support networks from static, sometimes even power-asymmetric "giver-receiver" structures into dynamic, reciprocity-based social relationship ecosystems. Within this system, the empowerment of each member directly translates into increased resources for the network itself, creating a self-sustaining and reinforcing virtuous cycle. This finding transcends the linear conception of social support as an external condition for empowerment, demonstrating that empowerment itself serves as the intrinsic driving force for the reproduction and expansion of social support networks. This holds core implications for constructing sustainable, more equitable social work models within China's sociocultural context, which emphasizes collectivity and relationality.

5.3 Methodological Implications: Capturing "Micro-Moments" in Practice Methodologically, This Study Demonstrates the Unique Advantage of Qualitative Case Studies in Capturing Complex Processes of Theoretical Integration.

Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, we can capture subtle yet crucial "micro-moments" that cannot be quantified by

standardized scales—such as an unsolicited act of assistance, an encouraging glance, or the joy of a successful endeavor. It is precisely these moments that constitute the critical junctures where theory "comes alive" in practice. Thus, this study also offers an important complementary perspective for understanding the effectiveness of social work practice: focusing on the micro-mechanisms of process, relationality, and interactivity. Of course, as a single-case exploration, the generalizability of this study's findings is limited. Future research could compare practices across different disability types and cultural contexts, or conduct long-term follow-ups to test the sustained efficacy and applicability boundaries of this "virtuous cycle" model.

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