A Review of Mental Health Policies in China

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Abstract: With the deepening of the individualization process in China, mental health is-sues have become important social and livelihood issues. This paper selects the perspective of "policy review" and adopts the method of literature review to conduct a systematic analysis of the external social environment and research status of mental health policies in China. The results show that policies in this field have the macro characteristics of "top-down". While the policy system is improving, there are still problems such as the imbalance of policy tools and the bias of policy objects. Meanwhile, the existing research mainly focuses on the analysis of texts at the national level, lacking in-depth discussions on the policy process, implementation effects, and differences in local policies. In terms of research methods, most quantitative models are limited to relatively isolated static analysis and fail to fully evaluate the policy synergy and the coordination mechanism among policy subjects.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the modernization of China, especially the process of individualization, has entered a new stage, psychological problems, as one of the important manifestations of modernity issues, are constantly attracting the attention of the Chinese government and society (Yan, 2021). On March 5, 2025, Premier Li Qiang mentioned "improving the mental health service system" in the "Report on the Work of Government" delivered at the Third Session of the 14th National People's Congress, which is the latest statement since the first relevant policy document was issued in 1999 (Li, 2025). However, it is clearly insufficient to establish a complete system for "mental health services" from scratch in just 25 years. In fact, it was not until 2016 that the government made its first attempt to build a large-scale social psychological service system, and in 2021, mental disorders still ranked 11th among the causes of death for urban and rural residents in some areas of China (Chen, 2018, National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). It can be said that mental health and psychological well-being remain important livelihood and social issues in Chinese society. Correspondingly, how the government makes efforts to improve the public service system used to get the issue solved also has significant research value.

In 2022, Goldman et al. emphasized the significance of the connection between evidence and policy in mental health service research and proposed the form of "policy review" (Goldman, et al, 2022). On the basis of this new theoretical perspective, this article focuses on what efforts China has put into developing the mental health service system through policies. Using the method of literature review, the paper attempts to describe the unique environment and features of the formation of China's mental health service system in terms of policies, and summarizes the current research status in this field from three aspects: content, object and method, and points out the deficiencies of the existing research in the policy process and effect with the aim of pointing out the direction for subsequent research and the intervention of social work, and promoting the improvement of the service system that is related to mental health in China.

2 METHODS

This study selects core journals and CSSCI to search for relevant academic research on the websites of Web of Science and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), taking "psychology", "mental health" and "policy" as the key words. Inclusion criteria: (1) The text content is related to mental

health and related support services; (2) Related to the policy field; (3) The disciplinary background is related to sociology or social policies. Through retrieval, association search, inclusion and exclusion, a total of 27 literatures were screened out as the research objects. (See Table 1)

Table 1. General Situation of the literature.

Title	Journal	Author
No Health without Mental Health	Lancet	Prince M., Patel V., Shekhar S., etal
Scale up of services for mental health in low-income and middle-income countries	Lancet	Eaton J., McCay L., Semrau M., etal
Equity of access to health care services: Theory and evidence from the UK	Social Science & Medicine	Goddard M., Smith P.
E-therapy: Practical, ethical, and legal issues	CyberPsychology & Behavior	Manhal-Baugus M.
Collaborative risk assessment in secure and forensic mental health settings in the UK	General Psychiatry	Markham S.
Building Bridges Between Evidence and Policy in Mental Health Services Research: Introducing the Policy Review Article Type	Psychiatric Services	Goldman M.L., Swartz M.S., Norquist G.S., etal
Rogers' Humanistic Educational Thought and Its Significance	Journal of Sichuan Normal University (Social Science Edition)	Zeng Deqi
The Development of Group Counseling in China: Review and Prospect	Journal of Tsinghua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)	Pei Fumin
Current Situation of Chinese College Mental Health Education Faculties and Policy of Recommended	Journal of Hubei University (Philosophy and Social Science)	Feng Tielei
A Review of Researches on Internet Psychological Counseling	Chinese Journal of Special Education	Li Chengqi
Research and Practice of System of Public Psychological Services	Bulletin of Chinese Academy of Sciences	Chen Xuefeng
From Mental Health Service to Social Psychological Service: A Major Innovation of Social Governance System in China	The Journal of Shanghai Administration Institute	Lin Ying, Jiang Junjie
Quantitative Analysis of China's Mental Health and Mental Hygiene Policy Text in 1999— 2023 Based on Policy Tools	Modern Preventive Medicine	Chen Xiaomin, Yang Jiamin, Chen Dandi, etal
The Characteristics, Problems and Optimization Paths of Mental Health Service Policies in the New Era: An Analytical Framework Based on Policy Concepts, Goals and Tools	Academic Circle	Liu Ziyi
The incremental logic of China mental health policy making: An Interpretion toward the Road of Mental Health Legislation	Chinese Journal of Health Policy	Zhao Deyu
Exploring the Impact of Online Diagnosis and Treatment Service Quality	Chinese Journal of Health Policy	Li Zhenlin, Guo Rui

on Patients' Continuance Intention Based on the Standardized Patient Method: Taking Online Mental Health Services as an Example		
Exploration on Approaches of Medical Social Work Involved in Mental Health Service in China	Medicine and Society	Xie Yingying, Fan Minglin
The Coming Age of China's Mental Health Social Work and Practical Research Agendas	Journal of Zhejiang Gongshang University	Liu Jitong
Research on China's Adolescent Mental Health Policies - Analysis Based on PMC Index Model	Frontiers in Public Health	Yang C.N.
The Public Psychological Service System with Multiple Integrated Structures: Policy-making Approach, Construction Strategy and Core Content	Advances in Psychological Science	Wang Junxiu
Research and Prospect of Social Psychological Service System	Henan Social Science	Zhang Yanjun
"Live for Yourself" or "Live Your Own Way"——Rethinking the Localization of Chinese Individualized Proposition	Exploration and Free Views	Yan Yunxiang
The evolution of mental health related policies in China: A bibliometric analysis, 1987-2020	Frontiers in Public Health	Li H.Y., Zhou Q.Y., Zhu H., etal
Mental health policy and implementation from 2009 to 2020 in China	SSM-Mental Health	Chen R.Z., Zhang W.F., Wu X M
The Development and Evolution of Community Mental Health Policies in China from 1998 to 2013	China CDC Weekly	Yan J., Yu X., Zhang X.L.
Mental Health Services in China: Research on the Relationship between Demands and Services	Studies of Psychology and Behavior	Huang Xiting, Zheng Yong
A Study on Mental Health Service Needs among Older Adults and the Policy Response in China: Experiences in Urban Shanghai	Ageing International	Chen H.L., Chen Y.Y., Wang Y., etal

3 RESULTS

3.1 The Unique Environment and Features of the Policies in China

The humanistic thought represented by Rogers has led to the attention of developed states to mental health issues (Zeng, 2003). In 2007, several authors including M Prince, on behalf of the WHO, published a paper reporting global mental health issues in The LANCET, pointing out that mental health is inseparable from physical health and that there are complex interactions between mental health issues and other health problems, and calling for attention to mental health issues; subsequently, the follow-up report released by J Eaton et al. in 2011 conducted a comprehensive assessment of the expansion of mental health services around the world through systematic literature review and global surveys, providing a practical action guideline for low- and middle-income nations (Prince, et al, 2007; Eaton, et al, 2011). However, their research only includes literature in English, French and Spanish and fails to fully explore how to adjust the service expansion strategy according to the specific needs of different regions; Against this background, Huang Xiting and Zheng Yong pointed out the limitations of Western theories in the context of Chinese culture in their research and proposed the necessity of constructing a

mental health service system combining traditional Chinese culture and modern culture (Huang, Zheng, 2015). On this basis, Chen Xuefeng systematically sorted out for the first time the policy evolution, practical exploration and international experience of the construction of China's public psychological service system, and constructed a relatively complete theoretical framework, proposing the development path from psychological counseling to mental health education and services (Chen, 2018). Chen mentioned in his article that the core of the public psychological service system is "to enhance the mental health of people and foster harmonious and stable development of society through mental health services." Although the publication of his research was later than that of Huang and Zheng's earlier studies, given Chen's clear demarcation of relevant definitions and the comprehensiveness and systematicness of the analytical framework, his research has become a major symbol of localized research in China, providing inspiration for subsequent research on Chinese characteristics.

Due to political and cultural factors, the individualization process in China shows great differences compared with that in Europe (Yan, 2021). Correspondingly, "mental health service system" erected by Chinese government and those in Europe or the United States have also taken completely different routes: Different from the form based on humanistic thought, which is relatively more detailed and specialized and focuses on the cost of medical services and patient participation in policies, it presents a more macroscopic and "top-down" feature (Goddard, Smith, 2011; Markham, 2020; Zhang, 2023). That is, under the guidance of the policies issued by the Party and the state, all sectors of society carry out mental health services in accordance with the policy texts and perform their respective duties. However, due to the continuous changes in the external environment, the incremental and cost-saving characteristics of policy-making, the logic of interpreting the mental health service system within the Party and the state is inconsistent, the relevant policies at the national level have undergone multiple orientation changes (Zhao, 2012; Zhang, 2023). This leads to the fact that on the surface, mental health policies are constantly introduced, so it seems like the policy system tends to be improved and the supporting measures are optimized. In reality, however, there are still problems such as tension between the old and new policies, imbalance among various policy tools, and the main concentration of policy objects in the health system and the education system (Liu, 2023; Chen, et al, 2024).

3.2 Classified by Research Content

In terms of research content, scholars in China and abroad have noticed the importance of online mental health services at the first time and made a systematic analysis of it (Li, 2007; Manhal-Baugus, 2001). After the technical progress and the release of "Administrative Measures for Internet-based Medical Diagnosis (Trial)", Li Zhenlin and Guo Rui mentioned the new situation and problems of online mental health services in their research, but are limited to the analysis of the method itself without discussing existing policy impact of mental health services online (Li, Guo, 2023). Schools where teenagers and various ideological trends gather can be said to be areas where the trend of individualization is relatively obvious. Regarding mental health services within the Chinese education system, Yang Chengning, Fan Fumin and Feng Tielei respectively made discussions on policy texts, consultation models and the construction of the teaching staff, but there is a problem of insufficient sample persuasiveness (Yang, 2024; Pei, 2005; Feng, 2008). Unlike individualization under the second modernity in Europe, the individualization process in China is led by the state, but the policy system has not yet been fully established. This requires the foundation of a social psychological service system to address the problems that individuals encounter during the process of embedding into the system. Since the system's creation, Chen Xuefeng, Wang Junxiu, Lin Ying and Jiang Junjie have all published pertinent studies in an effort to pinpoint its precise location and emphasize the fact that it is not just a mental health service but also possesses social governance traits (Chen, 2018; Lin, Jiang, 2019; Wang, 2020). However, there is a lack of sufficient empirical support, and the discussions on the cases (such as Changning District, Shanghai)are relatively not extensive. As the spokesperson of the government, social work is directly connected to individuals and forms an essential part of the social psychological service system. Regarding the role of social work in mental health services, Liu Jitong made a systematic conception for the first time, constructed a practical research agenda, and clarified the scope of the topics (Liu, 2017). On this basis, Xie Yingying and Fan Minglin pointed out the specific intervention paths and analyzed the existing problems both theoretically and practically (Xie, Fan, 2019). On this basis, Chen R Z et al. not only conducted text analysis in the research on how community mental health policies in China have developed, but also took the 686 pilot program as the core case, focusing on discussing the

policy adjustments and implementation optimizations that the project experienced from the pilot practice (that is, verifying the feasibility of the policy through local trials) at the beginning of its implementation to the subsequent gradual promotion to the whole country (Chen, et al, 2023).

3.3 Classified by the Research Object

The research objects of the literatures can be roughly divided into policy content, policy process and policy practice. The research on policy content accounts for 16 out of the existing 23 literatures, basically focusing on policy objects, policy tools and policy goals. Among them, a relatively typical one is the quantitative study by Chen Xiaomin et al. on 144 national policy texts from 1999 to 2023 (Chen, et al, 2024). There are relatively few studies on policy practice, totaling 4. Among them, the research of Feng and Yan et al. mainly focuses on the implementing subjects of mental health policy practices, pointing out the actual state of policy practices by describing their evolution (Feng, 2008; Yan, Yu, Zhang, 2023). The research by Chen R Z et al. comprehensively demonstrated the effectiveness of policy practice through the collection of various types of data and the qualitative analysis of the transformation of service models (Chen, Zhang, Wu, 2023). Chen H L et al. conducted in-depth interviews on the demand and supply predicament of services aiming at improving mental health among the elderly in Shanghai (Chen, et al, 2023). Starting from the real situation and personal feelings of the policy objects, they revealed the deficiencies of policy practice in the actual effect. It should be pointed out that research on the policy process is particularly rare. Among all the research objects in this article, the only one is Zhao Deyu's study on the process of the mental health Legislation and the formulation logic of related policies in 2012 (Zhao, 2012). However, after more than ten years of development, the reality has undergone tremendous changes. Many of the problems and rules pointed out by Zhao in his article are clearly no longer applicable.

3.4 Classified by Research Methods

In terms of research methods, Chen et al. established a two-dimensional quantitative model of "policy tool-policy object" by coding the policy text into software (Chen, et al, 2024). Yang Chengning conducted a pioneering quantitative assessment of 10 national adolescent mental health policies through the PMC index model (Yang, 2024). Li H Y et al. analyzed and summarized the evolution trend of China's mental health-related policies from 1987 to 2020 using bibliometric analysis, and innovatively appropriated the H-index into the field of policy analysis to evaluate the influence of policy-issuing institutions (Li, et al, 2022). The characteristics and problems of China's mental health service policies in the new era were analysed qualitatively by Liu Ziyi from three dimensions: policy concepts, goals and tools, and constructed an analytical framework based on policy concepts, goals and tools (Liu, 2023). Zhao Deyu established the "problem-tool-community" analysis model and explained the logic of mental health policy making and law formulation from four aspects: supply, demand, social impact, formulation authority and division of functional departments (Zhao, 2012). Li Zhenlin and Guo Rui employed the "standardized patient method" to explore the relationship between the quality of online mental health services and patients' willingness to continue using them (Li, Guo, 2023). These studies generally constitute the main paradigms for the current research on domestic mental health-related policies, providing methodological guidance for subsequent studies.

4 DISCUSSION

The existing research has made a very detailed and comprehensive analysis of national policy texts and their evolution, providing various analysis models such as "problem - tool - community", PMC index model, and analysis perspectives such as "demand - service relationship", "policy concept, goal and tool" for the quantitative analysis of mental health policy. It reveals the status quo that the mental health policy system in China is constantly optimizing and developing and the legal guarantee system is no longer missing, as well as problems such as multi-level imbalances among various policies and the underdevelopment of community grassroots and social psychological service institutions.

However, there are significant differences in social, economic and cultural aspects among various regions in China, and the two-way influence between this and local mental health policies is also quite obvious. For instance, while the development level of online mental health services in first-tier cities is relatively high, the number of related institutions established in some provinces is almost zero. Existing researches are generally limited to the national policy level, lacking systematic statistics and differential analysis of local policies. Moreover, there are few studies on the policy process and the actual

implementation effect of policies, especially the lack of long-term empirical research from the perspective of policy objects (such as the elderly group, the student group, etc.). This academic field has remained almost blank until now.

In addition, models adopted in the current quantitative research are relatively isolated. Basically, policy texts are encoded, and then the patterns are summarized through static classification and frequency analysis. This method is only able to assess the completeness of the policy text and the comprehensiveness of the description, which fails to take into account the time factor, the synergy of multiple policies and their common influence, and cannot directly judge the actual effect or superiority or inferiority of the policy. The analysis of the issuing institutions of policies is limited to generating relationship diagrams or expanding based on the h-index, that is, the number of citations. This method is obviously insufficient for in-depth analysis of the coordination and competition process among various policy subjects. New parameters need to be introduced as a common reference for further explaining the multi-departmental collaboration mechanism.

5 CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the review and analysis of 27 literatures at home and abroad. Studies show that the construction of China's mental health service system relies on the introduction of government policies, and the orientation of the policies themselves has currently shifted to "mental health". Existing research on policy texts has pointed out the imbalance of policy tools and the bias of policy objects. This requires all regions to establish a complete social psychological service system in order to supplement the deficiencies of government policies. Based on the consideration of China's socialist ideology and the policy system characterized mainly by "top-down", the grassroots governance organization among the policy objects that has the closest relationship with the people, namely the "community", should have been a part that plays an important role in dealing with the mental problems faced by individuals in the process of embedding, de-embedding and re-embedding of drastically changing externalities. However, existing research indicates that the policies and measures of the Chinese government in this regard are still in the initial stage of development and the construction is not sufficient. Considering that the national vocational qualification certification for

psychological counselors was abolished in China in 2017 and the relevant industry management has not been fully established, social work should play a role with great potential at present. However, there are problems such as uneven professional levels of social workers, unclear positioning, and insufficient professional identity.

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