

## **PROFESSIONAL COMMITMENT OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN MAINLAND CHINA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** *This study explores the relationships between social workers' traits, professional identification, shared vision, job satisfaction and professional commitment in Mainland China. The study proposes that six traits of servant leaders, namely Commitment, Humility, Resilience, Integrity, Service and Teamwork, are essential for social workers.*

**Methodology:** *These six specific traits form a broad framework of traits of social workers, which has a significant association with social workers' shared vision and other outcomes. A questionnaire was developed and validated with Confirmatory Factor Analysis. The hypotheses in the study were all supported by the Structural Equation Model.*

**Findings:** *The analysis showed that the traits of social workers have a significant positive effect on all other variables directly or indirectly through shared vision and identification of professionalism as intervening variables. Shared vision and identification with professionalism directly affect job commitment, respectively. Additionally, shared vision also has significant direct effects on job satisfaction which in turn affects commitment. These findings can cast light on the importance of traits of social workers and shared vision, which can positively affect social workers' identification with their professionalism and effective performance.*

**Applications:** *Essential Traits of social workers identified in this study may apply to the identification of potential social workers. The development of shared vision and traits of social workers are important strategies for improving the quality of service and retention of social workers.*

**Keywords:** Traits Of Social Workers, Professional Identification, Shared Vision, Job Satisfaction, Commitment.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social work is fundamentally concerned with promoting the well-being of individuals, families and communities. It is rooted in a commitment to community service, social justice, human rights and the empowerment of marginalized populations. Social workers collaborate with clients to provide essential services that address their challenges and empower them to improve their quality of life. The profession is often conceptualized as a form of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1997), where the effectiveness of practitioners is shaped by their personal attributes, vision and adherence to the principles of social work professionalism.

The role of social workers involves addressing complex social issues and advocating for vulnerable populations, making their professional commitment crucial. This commitment is closely linked to their personal attributes, the vision that guides their practice and the professional support they receive. Social workers' sustained commitment to their profession is essential for achieving positive outcomes for clients and for improving the overall well-being of society.

This study argues that the characteristics associated with servant leadership are integral to the role of social workers. In particular, it identifies six key characteristics of servant leaders - commitment, humility, resilience, integrity, service and teamwork (Chui et al., 2024) which are strongly linked to a social worker's vision, values, professional identity and long-term commitment to the field. The findings of this study shed light on the relationship between these characteristics and social workers' alignment with their organizations' vision, their identification with the professionalism of social work, their job satisfaction, and their sustained commitment to the profession.

A theoretical model was developed to explore relationships, based on a review of the literature. A questionnaire measured five relevant constructs, and its validity was tested on 449 Chinese social workers. The theoretical model was then tested, and its relationships were confirmed. The study offers deeper understanding of the interplay between servant leadership traits, professional identity, organizational vision, job satisfaction and commitment, providing valuable insights for improving social work practice.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Traits of Social Workers

Many factors may contribute to the long-term commitment of social workers. Personality traits, as one of the significant factors, play a significant role in influencing a social worker's dedication to their profession and long-term commitment. This study proposes that the traits of servant leaders (Chui et al., 2024), which are known for their service-oriented and collaborative approach, are essential traits of social workers. The following review of the literature will further elucidate this connection.

Research in personality psychology highlights that traits represent relatively stable patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that predispose individuals to respond in particular ways under specific circumstances (Roberts, 2009).

In leadership studies, traits associated with servant leadership have been found to significantly influence leadership behaviors and organizational outcomes (Eva et al., 2019; Yukl, 1989). This underscores the significance of examining the relationship between servant leadership traits and professional performance, particularly within the context of social work.

Social workers play a critical role in enhancing the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. They bring distinct personal traits that align closely with the profession's core values, influencing their service-oriented behaviors. Among the five fundamental social work values, *service* and *integrity* are particularly salient as they reflect essential characteristics of servant leadership. Social workers are expected to demonstrate cultural humility and awareness through practices such as critical self-reflection, recognizing clients as experts in their own cultural contexts, engaging in lifelong learning, and holding institutions accountable for fostering cultural humility (Barsky, 2021). Notably, humility stands out as a foundational trait of servant leadership (Chui et al., 2024).

Through their professional practice, social workers provide essential support, empower clients to overcome challenges, and engage in interdisciplinary collaboration. These responsibilities mirror the principles of servant leadership, which emphasize prioritizing the needs of others, facilitating problem-solving, and fostering collaboration through a strong sense of commitment. Viewing social workers through the lens of servant leadership, therefore, presents a meaningful and necessary perspective that may elucidate the factors contributing to their effectiveness. This study adopts the framework of servant leadership traits to examine how these traits relate to social workers' professional effectiveness, thereby offering significant insights into social work practice and performance.

Chui et al. (2024) identified and validated six key traits of servant leaders through a large-scale questionnaire study involving approximately 1,000 respondents. These traits include *commitment*, *humility*, *resilience*, *integrity*, *service* and *teamwork* (Acronym: *CHRIST*). The present study employs this framework to investigate the influence of these six traits on social workers' professional vision to serve, professional identification, and commitment.

## 2.2. Viewing Social Workers through the Lens of Servant Leadership

The concept of servant leadership was first introduced by Greenleaf (1970), who described a leadership philosophy that positions the leader primarily as a servant. This approach emphasizes prioritizing the needs of others, empowering teams, and fostering the growth of individuals. Building on Greenleaf's foundational work, Spears (2010) identified ten core characteristics of servant leadership: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

A review of the literature on servant leadership highlights several key traits - such as service (Greenleaf, 2002), honesty (Page & Wong, 2000; Russell & Stone, 2002), integrity (Page & Wong, 2000), commitment to the growth of people, community building (Spears, 2010), and empathy (Page & Wong, 2000; Spears, 2010) that are intrinsic to servant leaders. These traits closely align with the core values of social work, which include service, social justice, the dignity and worth of individuals, the importance of human relationships, integrity, competence, empathy, cultural humility, and commitment to clients (Barsky, 2021; Osteen, 2011).

The alignment between the traits of servant leaders and the core values of social work underscores the idea that social workers inherently embody the principles of servant leadership. This alignment enhances their effectiveness in professional practice, enabling them to better serve clients and advocate for social justice.

### **2.3. Essential Traits of a Servant Leader and Social Worker**

Chui et al. (2024) identified six essential traits of servant leaders, which this study argues are equally critical for social workers. These traits—service, integrity, humility, commitment, resilience, and teamwork—align closely with the core values and professionalism of social work, as supported by the following review of relevant literature.

Service is a foundational trait of servant leadership and a core value of social work. Studies highlight the intrinsic desire to serve as central to both servant leadership (Dutta & Khatri, 2017) and social work practice (Barsky, 2021; Osteen, 2011). Providing service to clients is a primary responsibility of social workers, making this trait indispensable to their professional identity.

Integrity is universally recognized as a key characteristic of effective leaders (Duggar, 2009) and servant leaders (Russell & Stone, 2002; Winston, 1999). In social work, integrity is a cornerstone of ethical practice, guiding decision-making and ensuring accountability (Banks, 2010; Webster, 2016). This trait fosters trust and credibility, enabling social workers to advocate for clients while adhering to the profession's ethical standards.

Humility is another defining trait of servant leaders (Patterson, 2003; Russell, 2001) and is critical to effective social work practice. More than just a personal quality, humility enhances professional performance by enabling authentic and empathetic engagement with clients (Coetzer et al., 2017; Gottlieb, 2021).

Commitment to the growth of others is a hallmark of servant leadership (Liden et al., 2008; Spears, 2010) and a foundational principle of social work (Collins, 2016). Social workers' dedication to clients fosters trust, rapport, and empowerment, even in the face of challenges. This unwavering commitment reflects the profession's ethical mandate and serves as a source of inspiration for practitioners.

Resilience, the ability to recover from adversity, is essential for both servant leaders and social workers. Given the emotionally demanding nature of social work, resilience enables practitioners to manage stress and maintain their well-being, which in turn helps them support clients effectively (van Breda, 2018). Resilience is a vital quality that sustains social workers in the face of professional challenges.

Teamwork is integral to servant leadership (Chui et al., 2024) and is at the heart of social work's collaborative approach. Social workers frequently work in multidisciplinary teams to address complex client needs, ensuring comprehensive care (Albrithen & Yalli, 2015). This collaborative ethos enhances service delivery and reflects the inclusive nature of the profession.

In summary, the six traits identified by Chui et al. (2024) as essential for servant leaders—service, integrity, humility, commitment, resilience, and teamwork—are equally vital for social workers. These traits align with the core values of social work and are fundamental to the profession's commitment to ethical and effective practice.

## 2.4. Social Workers in Mainland China

The professional commitment of social workers in mainland China has been explored in various academic works, particularly focusing on the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to maintain their roles in an evolving social landscape. One significant study is a Ph.D. dissertation titled "Survival in an emerging profession: narratives of social workers in mainland China" by Zhang Y.Y. (2020), which provides a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of social workers since the introduction of national licensure in 2008.

It was widely recognized that this movement was resulted from the Sichuan Earthquake which had resulted in 87,587 dead toll, 374,643 injured and 18,392 missing (Wikipedia). Arising from this unprecedented turmoil since the Tang Shan Earthquake in 1976, there was a urge for social work reform in China. As a result, more systematic approach towards social work and hence national licensure was developed.

As a result, social workers in China encounter numerous challenges due to changing social structures, pay-associated status, and personal daily practices. Many leave the profession after a few years due to these difficulties. The study identifies two main themes of challenges: constraining social structures and immature professionalization, which vary across different professional stages (frontline workers, program managers, and organizational managers).

The research outlines several coping strategies that social workers utilize to navigate these challenges. These include: (a) Building partnerships and integrating resources; (b) Utilizing personal and professional support networks; and (c) Improving organizational governance and strategic management.

Zhang emphasizes the importance of both intrinsic motivations (such as commitment to the social work mission) and extrinsic needs (like economic stability) in ensuring long-term professional survival. He describes a dual coping process: "inside-out," which focuses on internal strengths, and "outside-in," which leverages external resources. Social workers often prefer the inside-out approach as a survival mode.

Wang et al. (2020) found that autonomy of social workers affect job satisfaction which then affects turnover rate of social workers in China. Wang et al. (2021) found that low pay and the absence of professional identity are factors related to the turnover of social workers in China and suggested that adequate pay and professional Identity should be a top priority in social work education, training, exams and practice in China.

## 3. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

### 3.1. Professionalism Identification

Social work is a vital profession committed to improving the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. As advocates for social justice, social workers address complex societal issues such as poverty, mental health, and domestic violence. The professional identification of social workers is an essential component of their engagement, job satisfaction, and overall effectiveness in practice. Understanding the factors that shape professional identification is crucial for supporting social workers in their roles and enhancing their contributions to society.

Professional identification refers to the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as members of a specific profession and align their values, beliefs, and behaviors with its norms and standards (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

For social workers, professional identification is influenced by several key factors, including personal values, peer relationships, adherence to ethical standards, and education and training. These factors collectively shape how practitioners connect with and embody the principles of their profession.

Personal values and beliefs play a significant role in the development of professional identification among social workers. Many practitioners enter the field with a strong commitment to social justice, advocacy, and client empowerment.

When these personal values align closely with the core principles of social work, such as promoting dignity and respect for individuals and advancing equity, social workers are more likely to experience a strong sense of professional identity (Bisman, 2004; Chechak, 2015). This alignment fosters a deep connection to the profession and enhances their motivation and satisfaction in their work.

Professional support also contributes to professional identification by fostering a sense of belonging within the social work community. Collaborative practices and supportive interactions among colleagues reinforce social workers' commitment to their profession. Strong peer networks provide opportunities for mutual learning, emotional support, and shared problem-solving, enabling practitioners to navigate the challenges of their work more effectively (Moorhead, 2021). These relationships cultivate solidarity and strengthen social workers' identification with the professional community.

A core element of professionalism in social work is adherence to ethical standards, as outlined in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. This code provides a comprehensive framework for practice, emphasizing fundamental principles such as service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the individual, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. These ethical guidelines shape social workers' conduct, ensuring that their actions align with the values and expectations of the profession. Social workers often encounter ethical dilemmas, such as balancing client confidentiality with the need to report potential harm. In such situations, reflective practice and adherence to ethical standards are essential for maintaining professionalism and fostering trust between practitioners and their clients. This trust forms the foundation of the therapeutic alliance, which is critical for effective intervention.

Education and training are essential components of professionalism in social work, providing the knowledge and skills required for effective practice. Most social workers hold a Bachelor's or Master's degree in social work (BSW or MSW) from accredited institutions, which ensures their preparedness for the field. Academic programs typically cover topics such as human behavior, social welfare policy, research methods, and practice techniques, while supervised field placements offer hands-on experience that reinforces professional values and competencies (Cellini & Dellavalle, 2022; Moorhead, 2021; Pullen Sansfaçon & Crête, 2016). These educational experiences are critical for developing a strong professional identity and equipping social workers to address the complexities of their roles.

Moreover, continued education is vital for maintaining professionalism in the ever-evolving field of social work. The dynamic nature of social issues requires practitioners to stay informed about emerging research, policies, and practices. Professional development opportunities, including workshops, conferences, and additional certifications, enable social workers to enhance their skills and adapt to new challenges. This commitment to lifelong learning ensures that social workers remain effective and responsive in addressing the needs of individuals and communities.

In conclusion, the professional identification of social workers is shaped by a combination of personal values, peer relationships, adherence to ethical standards, and education and training.

These elements collectively foster a strong sense of belonging and alignment with the social work profession, enhancing practitioners' engagement, motivation, and effectiveness. By supporting the development of professional identification, social work organizations can empower practitioners to better serve their clients and contribute to positive social change. A committed and professional social work workforce is therefore essential for advancing the mission of social work and promoting the well-being of society.

### 3.2. Role of Professional Organizations

In China, social workers are required to register with a professional organization, which plays a critical role in promoting and sustaining the professionalism of the field. Professional organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) provide valuable resources, advocacy, and networking opportunities for practitioners. These organizations also actively engage in shaping social policies and promoting social justice, which are central to the mission of social work. Their efforts contribute to advancing the profession while supporting social workers in their commitment to ethical and effective practice.

Professional organizations do more than establish licensing standards and certification pathways; they also cultivate a sense of community and shared learning among practitioners. By offering platforms for discussions about best practices, ethical dilemmas, and emerging challenges, these organizations ensure that social workers have access to collective support and guidance. This sense of community is a vital component of the professional experience, reducing isolation and fostering collaboration, which is especially important in a field as demanding and complex as social work.

The concept of professionalism in social work extends beyond a formal designation; it represents a deep commitment to ethical standards, rigorous education and training, and the collective support provided by professional organizations. As the field continues to evolve in response to changing societal needs, maintaining high standards of professionalism is both essential and a shared responsibility. Strengthening the professional identification of social workers enhances their effectiveness in practice and reinforces public trust in the profession. This trust is crucial for social workers to fulfill their role as advocates for social justice and to address the diverse needs of the communities they serve. Social work as a professional field has low status in China. Along with poor salaries, heavy workloads, and weak professional guidance, the low public recognition has been put forward as an explanation for job dissatisfaction and high turnover rates in the sector (Jiang et al., 2017).

Social workers who strongly identify with their profession have demonstrated significant benefits for both individual practitioners and the field as a whole. Research has shown that professional identification positively influences job satisfaction and retention (Liu et al., 2023; E. Wang et al., 2021; Y. Wang & Tang, 2024), improves the quality of services provided to clients (Brawley & Schindler, 1991), and contributes to ongoing professional development (*Professional Competency Framework Hong Kong Academy of Social Work*, n.d.). These outcomes highlight the importance of fostering professionalism and supporting social workers in their dedication to ethical and effective practice. Ultimately, professionalism in social work is not only a marker of individual competence but also a foundation for advancing the collective impact of the profession.

### 3.3. Commitment

Commitment is defined as an individual's dedication and loyalty to the chosen profession, characterized by a strong belief in its values, a willingness to exert effort on its behalf, and a desire to maintain membership within it. This form of commitment comprises both emotional and rational dimensions. The emotional component reflects an individual's affection for the profession, while the rational component involves a consideration of the costs associated with leaving it.

Social workers exhibit a unique combination of affective, continuance, and normative commitment, as conceptualized in Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component model of organizational commitment.

This model is particularly relevant for understanding the multifaceted nature of commitment among social workers, given the emotionally demanding and complex nature of their work.

Affective commitment refers to social workers' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in their organizations. Social workers with high affective commitment align with the organization's goals and values, which often mirror the core principles of social work, such as advocacy, empathy, and social justice. Positive experiences in the workplace, such as recognition, organizational support, and meaningful work, enhance their emotional connection and satisfaction, fostering stronger identification with their organization.

Continuance commitment, on the other hand, is driven by an awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization. For social workers, these costs may include the loss of tangible benefits, disruption of relationships with clients, and limited availability of comparable employment opportunities. This form of commitment is often pragmatic, as the decision to remain is based on a calculated evaluation of what would be lost if they were to leave. While continuance commitment contributes to workforce stability, it does not necessarily indicate enthusiasm or passion for the role.

Normative commitment is characterized by a sense of moral obligation to remain with the organization. For social workers, this obligation stems from a deep sense of loyalty and responsibility toward their clients and the communities they serve (Meyer & Parfyonova, 2010). This commitment is often cultivated through professional socialization processes that emphasize ethical standards and the responsibilities of the profession. Social workers may feel morally compelled to remain with their organization due to its critical role in supporting vulnerable populations, aligning their personal values with the organization's mission (Jaskyte & Lee, 2009).

In conclusion, the commitment of social workers to their organizations is multidimensional, encompassing affective, continuance, and normative components. Social work organizations must adopt strategies that strengthen these dimensions to retain skilled professionals, enhance job satisfaction, and motivate their workforce. When social workers' commitment aligns with the organizational mission, it not only improves their individual well-being but also leads to more effective service delivery, ultimately benefiting the communities they serve. A committed and focused social work workforce is therefore essential to achieving positive outcomes for both clients and society.

### 3.4. Traits and Professionalism

Traits are relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that reflect an individual's tendency to respond in certain ways under different circumstances (Roberts, 2009).



Social workers who embody traits such as service, commitment, humility, resilience, integrity, and teamwork naturally align with the core values and ethical standards of the social work profession. These traits enable them to think, feel, act, and respond in ways that are consistent with the ethical requirements of social work. This inherent alignment instils confidence in their abilities and enhances their motivation to identify with the professionalism of social work, allowing them to work with purpose and meaning. This study posits that social workers who exhibit the broad trait of servant leadership will strengthen their identification with the professionalism of social work, as outlined in Hypothesis-1.

#### **3.4.1. Traits and shared vision of social workers**

Shared vision is a fundamental component of team dynamics across various sectors, particularly within social services, where it holds substantial significance for social workers dedicated to their organizations.

As conceptualized by Anderson and West (1998) and Pearce and Ensley (2004), shared vision in social services is grounded in common goals such as empowering individuals, upholding social justice, and improving community well-being. These shared goals unify organisations and reflect the core values of social work, including service, integrity, humility, commitment, teamwork, and collaboration.

Despite the diverse focuses of social service organizations, they are united by these shared visions and missions, which act as a cohesive force aligning social workers' efforts with their organisations' overarching objectives. This alignment fosters a stronger sense of organizational identification among social workers, creating a positive feedback loop that reinforces optimism and hope regarding the impact of their work.

Social workers occupy a critical role in driving positive outcomes for both clients and communities, further deepening their connection to their organization's vision. Their unique position enables them to enact meaningful social change that aligns with the organizational goals of advancing social justice and empowering clients. The servant leadership traits essential for effective social work practice - commitment, humility, resilience, integrity, service, and teamwork - equip social workers to navigate the complexities of human experiences while infusing their work with purpose and meaning (Chui et al., 2024).

This study argues that social workers who exhibit these servant leadership traits are more likely to align closely with their social service organization's vision. Such alignment is critical not only for individual and organizational success but also for fostering broader societal change. Accordingly, this study hypothesizes that social workers who demonstrate the six key servant leadership traits (Chui et al., 2024) will positively influence their alignment with the vision of their social service organization, as articulated in Hypothesis-2.

#### **3.4.2. Shared Vision and Job Satisfaction**

Zhu (2013) identified role perception, job characteristics, and job performance as key antecedents influencing job satisfaction. Building on this, social workers who share a common vision are likely to possess a more accurate understanding of their roles, a clearer comprehension of job characteristics, and enhanced capacity for effective performance. When social workers find meaning in their work and experience alignment between their personal and organizational values, they are more likely to achieve higher levels of job satisfaction, driven by positive role perception and improved job performance. Based on this rationale, the current study hypothesizes that a shared vision will positively influence the job satisfaction of social workers, as stated in Hypothesis-3.

### **3.4.3. Shared Vision and Commitment**

The integration of servant leadership traits into daily practice is essential to maximizing the impact social workers can have in their roles. Central to this is the concept of a shared vision, which plays a pivotal role in strengthening social workers' commitment to their professional responsibilities and the broader goals of their organizations. In the context of social work, a shared vision serves as a powerful catalyst for fostering long-term dedication to the profession. This shared vision encompasses common goals, values, and principles that guide social workers in their practice and advocacy efforts. By aligning with a shared vision, social workers not only enhance their commitment to their roles but also contribute to the effectiveness of their organizations and the overall reputation of the profession.

A shared vision cultivates a sense of belonging, reinforcing social workers' sense of purpose and connection to their work. This, in turn, nurtures loyalty and dedication, motivating them to invest in their roles over the long term. As social workers perceive themselves as integral to a collective mission, their commitment to the profession deepens, resulting in increased job satisfaction and improved retention rates.

Moreover, alignment with a shared vision significantly enhances motivation among social workers. When practitioners understand and resonate with the overarching goals of their organizations or the profession at large, they are more likely to derive meaning and purpose from their work. This intrinsic motivation drives their dedication to the field, enabling them to persevere through challenges and engage in continuous learning and professional development.

Based on these considerations, this study hypothesizes that a shared vision among social workers will positively influence their commitment to their job, as stated in Hypothesis-4.

## **3.5. Professionalism Identification and Commitment**

Professionalism in social work goes beyond mere adherence to established standards or codes of conduct; it encompasses the identity, values and ethical responsibilities that practitioners uphold. The degree to which social workers identify with their professional ethos significantly influences role clarity, alignment with the profession's vision and values, and understanding of the purpose and meaning of their work. Together, these elements contribute to social workers' commitment through mechanisms such as job satisfaction and ethical alignment.

## **3.6. Increased Job Satisfaction**

Social workers' job satisfaction is strongly influenced by the extent to which they identify with their professional standards. This identification enables practitioners to integrate their personal values and aspirations with their professional responsibilities. Engaging in work that resonates with their sense of purpose not only fulfils social workers but also motivates them. This intrinsic motivation is crucial for promoting resilience to professional challenges, mitigating burnout and supporting commitment to the profession. Strong identification with professional values thus enhances job satisfaction and acts as a buffer against the high turnover rates typical of emotionally demanding social work environments.

### **3.6.1. Ethical Orientation**

The essence of social work professionalism is deeply intertwined with ethical principles, including service, social justice and integrity.

When social workers internalize and identify with these ethical standards, they are better able to navigate complex moral dilemmas and make decisions that are congruent with their personal and professional values. This congruence reinforces a sense of integrity and accountability that is fundamental to sustaining their commitment to the field. Furthermore, as social workers consistently act in accordance with these ethical principles, they develop a robust professional identity that further cements their commitment to ongoing practice.

Given this dynamic, this study posits that social workers' professional identification significantly predicts their commitment to the field. This relationship is articulated as Hypothesis-5, which proposes that a deep-seated identification with social work's professional values and ethics increases the likelihood of practitioners' sustained commitment to their role and the organizations they serve.

In summary, identification with social work professionalism plays a critical role in fostering job satisfaction and ethical alignment, which in turn enhance commitment. This study highlights the importance of fostering a work environment that supports and reflects the core professional values that attract individuals to the field of social work, thereby promoting retention and reducing turnover within the profession.

### ***3.6.2. Job Satisfaction and Commitment***

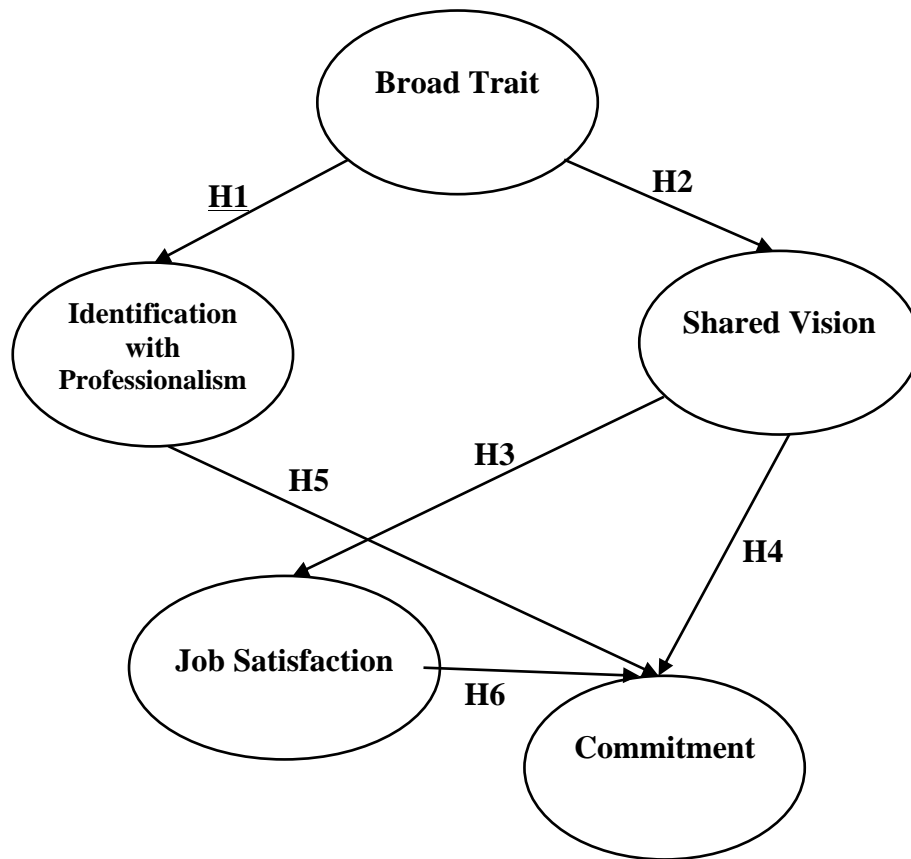
Studies showed that job satisfaction is related to organization commitment (Aydogdu & Asikgil, 2011; Ćulibrk et al., 2018). Tarigan and Ariani (2015) found that job satisfaction will reduce staff's intention to leave. The above results show that in when workers has job satisfaction, they will be more willing to stay in the job for a longer period. Hence this study proposes that job satisfaction of social workers will have a positive effect on their commitment as Hypothesis-6.

### ***3.6.3. Traits and Commitment***

The traits of social workers have a positive association with professional identification and shared vision, as proposed by Hypothesis-1 and 2, respectively, in this study. Shared Vision is proposed to have a positive effect on job satisfaction and commitment as Hypothesis-3 and 4 respectively. Professionalism is proposed to have positive association with commitment by Hypothesis-5. Combining the above relationships, it is proposed that Traits of social workers will be positively associated with commitment to the profession as Hypothesis-7 in this study.

### ***3.6.4. Theoretical Framework***

A theoretical framework of this study related to the hypotheses proposed is put forward to show the relationships among Traits, Shared Vision, Identification with Professionalism and Commitment in **Figure-1**.



**Figure-1:** Theoretical Framework

The above research framework has, to some extent, reflected the recent findings in the Literature Review Para. 2.4. above, namely, “Social Workers in Mainland China”. In particular Zhang (2020) found out that the professional status of social workers in China has undergone significant transformations since the introduction of the national licensing system in 2008. This reform was a response to the rapid social changes resulting from economic growth, urbanisation, and demographic shifts, which created an increased demand for professional social services. He studied the experience of social workers in mainland China in the emerging profession and suggested that relatively low salaries and lack of professional experience are some challenges facing social workers in Mainland China. The author suggested that understanding the social structures and enhancing personal capacities are crucial for the development of the social work profession in China. This research contributes significantly to the understanding of professional commitment among social workers in mainland China, highlighting the complexities of their roles and the necessity for supportive frameworks to enhance their professional longevity.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHOD

##### 4.1. Hypotheses

According to literature review, there are seven hypotheses proposed in this study:

**Hypothesis-1:** Social workers with six traits of servant leaders will positively affect their identification with the professionalism of social work.

- Hypothesis-2:** Social workers with six traits of servant leaders will positively affect their shared vision with their professional organization
- Hypothesis-3:** Social workers' sharing vision of their organization will have positive effects on their job satisfaction.
- Hypothesis-4:** Shared vision will enhance social workers' professional identification.
- Hypothesis-5:** Professional identification of social workers will enhance their commitment to the profession.
- Hypothesis-6:** Job satisfaction of social workers will enhance their commitment to the profession.
- Hypothesis-7:** Traits of social workers will have positive effects on their commitment to the profession.

## 4.2. Research Design

This research used a cross-sectional survey with a questionnaire developed to measure the six traits of social workers, shared vision and job satisfaction. The development of instruments went through the following stages: 1. Review of related literature and instruments already developed; 2. Proposing constructs related to this study and defining the constructs to be measured; 3. Developing instruments according to the proposed construct and situation of secondary schools in Hong Kong and with reference to instruments used by other studies; 4. Seeking comments from some focused groups and professionals with relevant experience and expertise to refine the proposed instruments; 5. Collection of data to validate the instruments; 6. Confirmatory Factor Analyses for validating the instruments; 7. Using the Structural Equation Model to investigate the relationship among variables according to the proposed theoretical framework.

## 4.3. Measures

### 4.3.1. *Traits (the variable is referred to as "traits" hereafter)*

The traits of a social worker are defined as the relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that reflect the tendency to respond in specific ways under certain circumstances. The validated questionnaire by Chui et al. (2024) is a comprehensive tool used to measure the broad and specific traits of social workers. This process involves a detailed examination of the specific traits of commitment, humility, resilience, service, and teamwork, with each trait being measured using four items. The six specific traits of social workers in this study are a result of this thorough measurement process. The broad trait, a full second-order factor of the six specific traits, is measured using all 24 items and will be referred to as the "Full broad trait" hereafter. A simple broad trait, a measure of the second order of the broad trait using one item from each specific trait, will be referred to as the "Simple broad trait" in this study hereafter.

### 4.3.2. *Shared vision (the variable is referred to as "Vision" hereafter)*

Shared vision is defined as a social worker sharing the vision and values of his or her working organization. Seven items were developed according to the literature reviewed and the definition of shared vision to measure the construct. Two examples are: "Staff engaged in development of a shared vision" and "Vision of the organisation is shared among staff".

#### **4.3.3. Professionalism Identification (the variable is referred to as “Professionalism” hereafter)**

Professionalism is defined as the identification with the social work profession by a social worker. Seven items were developed according to the literature reviewed and the definition to measure the construct. Two examples are: “Social work is a professional job” and “I can fulfill the ethical and professional requirements of social work”.

#### **4.3.4. Job satisfaction (hereafter referred to as “Satisfaction”)**

*Job satisfaction* is defined as the perception of social workers of their pleasant or positive affection state, which grows in the process of evaluating their individual work experience (Zhu, 2013). With reference to different aspects affecting the perception, five items are developed to measure *satisfaction*, including satisfaction with salary, professional collaboration from colleagues in their work, support from the working organisation, values and importance attached to the profession by the society. Two examples of the items are "satisfied with salary received" and “satisfied with support from colleagues”.

#### **4.3.5. Commitment (hereafter referred to as “Commitment”)**

*Commitment* is defined as the willingness of social workers to commit to working in the profession with psychological attachment and dedication (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Four items are developed to measure the affective, continuance and normative dimensions of the construct. Three examples of the items are "choose social work as a lifelong career" for the continuance dimension, “choose social work as my profession again if I were given a second chance to choose my profession” for the normative dimension, and “no regret in choosing social work as my profession” for the affective dimension.

## **5. ANALYSES AND RESULTS**

More than 494 social workers in China chosen by a convenience sample responded to the survey. After cleaning data with incomplete responses, 494 cases were analyzed by SPSS and AMOS version 29.

### **5.1. Demographic data**

494 social workers responded to the questionnaire. Their service areas include elderly services, children and young people services, school services, family services, minority ethnic group services, drug addiction services etc. The largest number of respondents come from children and young people services, and elderly services. 30% of respondents are middle rank social workers and 28 % come from assistant rank social workers. 48% of respondents are below 31 years old. 59% are degree graduates and 20% have a master's degree.

### **5.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

A measurement model with the *full broad trait, vision, professionalism and support* was confirmed with acceptable goodness of fit indices (CFI= 0.904; IFI=0.905; RMSEA=0.060). A measurement model with the *simple broad trait, vision, professionalism and support* was confirmed with acceptable goodness of fit indices (CFI= 0.965; IFI=0.965; RMSEA=0.048).

The Cronbach Alpha reliability of all the scales, measured by SPSS version 28, lies between 0.858 to 0.966. Correlation coefficients between the four constructs are significant at 0.01 level, ranging between 0.036 to 0.700, and 0.082 to 0.684 respectively for full broad trait model and simple broad trait model. The analyses above show that the four constructs are distinct and have discriminant validity.

### 5.3. Means and t-Tests of the Four Variables

The means and t-test as compared to 4, the mean value of the scale of the four variables are listed in **Table-1** below. The results show that the respondents have positive perception of their broad traits of social worker, identification with professionalism and shared vision. However, they have no significant positive nor negative perception on their long-term commitment, and significant negative perception of job satisfaction.

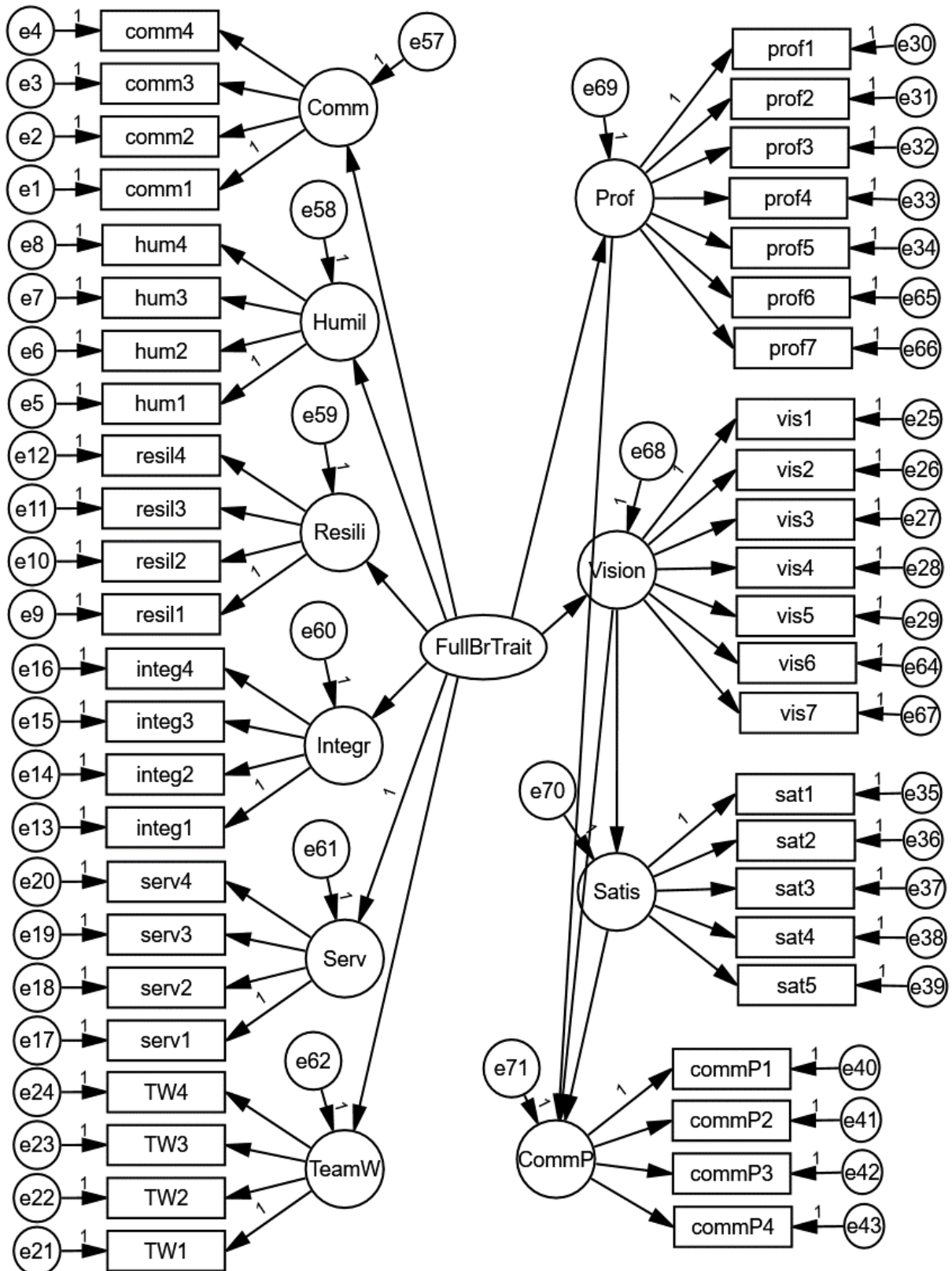
**Table-1: One-Sample Statistics**

	N	Mean	Mean difference with 4	t-value
Broadtrait	494	6.050	2.050	60.787*
Vision	494	5.909	1.909	35.845*
Professionalism	494	4.643	0.643	32.042*
Commitment	494	3.963	-0.037	-0.939
Satisfaction	494	2.854	-1.146	-26.187*

\*p<0.001

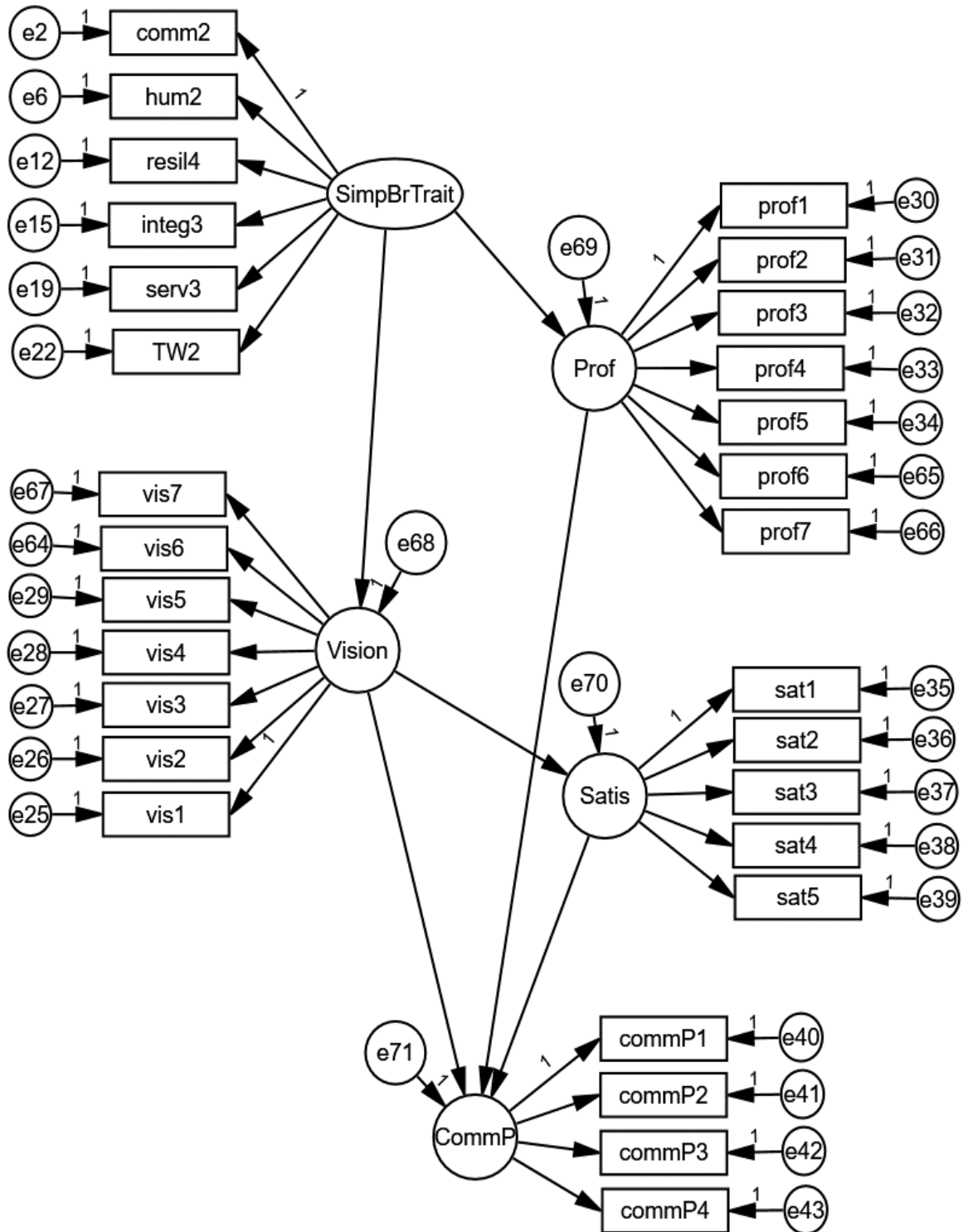
### 5.4. Structural Equation Model

In order to test the validity of Hypotheses 1 to 7 of this study, two structural equation models are put forward according to the theoretical model for analysis by Amos Version 29. The first model tests the relationships between full broad trait with other constructs. The full broad trait is a second order factor of six specific traits measured by 4 items each. The second model tests the relationships between simple broad trait with other constructs. The simple broad trait is a second order factor of broad trait using one item from each specific trait. The figures for both models are shown in **Figure-2** and **Figure-3** respectively. The goodness of fit indices of the SEM Model is good for both models (CFI=0.902; IFI=0.903; RMSEA= 0.061 for the first model and CFI=0.956; IFI=0.956; RMSEA= 0.053 for second model), providing strong support for the theoretical model. **Table-2** shows the standardised direct effects among the variables. The relationships among variables for both models are similar. The standardised direct effects between variables in both models are very close to one another. So both models can be used to interpret the relationships between constructs without much difference.



**Figure-2:** Model of Full Broad Trait with Other Constructs





**Figure-3:** Model of Simple Broad Trait with Other Constructs

**Table-2: Direct Effect (DE) and Total Effects (TE) between Variables of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Model**

Effect	1 <sup>st</sup> model with full broad trait (24 items) to other variables	2 <sup>nd</sup> model with simple broad trait (6 items) to other variables
Trait to Professionalism (DE)	0.704*	0.692*
Trait to Vision (DE)	0.600*	0.613*
Vision to Satisfaction (DE)	0.308*	0.368*
Vision to Commitment (DE)	0.334*	0.248*
Satisfaction to Commitment (DE)	0.266*	0.293*
Professionalism to Commitment (DE)	0.325*	0.362*
Total effect of Trait to Commitment (TE)	0.478*	0.469*

\*p&lt;0.001

### 5.5. Relationships between Variables

**Table-2** reveals a significant direct effect of 0.704 and 0.692 of Broad traits of social workers on identification with professionalism for full broad trait (measured by 24 items) and simplified broad trait (measured by 6 items) respectively. These findings, which strongly support Hypothesis-1, underscore the crucial role of social workers' six traits of servant leaders in shaping their identification with the professionalism of social work.

The significant direct effect of 0.600 and 0.613 of broad trait of social workers on social workers' shared vision for full broad trait (measured by 24 items) and simplified broad trait (measured by 6 items) respectively, as shown in **Table-2**, provides strong validation for Hypothesis-2. This underscores the credibility of the research, which states that social workers' six traits of servant leaders positively influence their shared vision with their professional organisation.

Shared vision has significant direct effects of 0.308 and 0.368 on satisfaction for full broad trait model (measured by 24 items) and simplified broad trait model (measured by 6 items) respectively. This result supports Hypothesis-3, which states that social workers' sharing vision of their organization will have positive effects on their job satisfaction.

Shared vision has a significant direct effect on commitment with direct effect of 0.334 and 0.248 respectively for full trait model and simple trait model respectively. These findings support Hypothesis-4, which states that shared vision of social workers will enhance their commitment to the profession.

Professionalism has significant direct effects of 0.325 and 0.362 on a commitment to the profession for the full trait model and simple trait model, respectively. This supports Hypothesis-5 which states that professional identification of social workers will enhance their long-term commitment to the profession.

Job satisfaction has significant direct effects of 0.266 and 0.293 on a commitment to the profession for the full trait model and simple trait model, respectively. This supports Hypothesis-6 which states that job satisfaction of social workers will enhance their long-term commitment to the profession.

**Table-2** reveals significant total effects of 0.478 and 0.469 of broad trait of social workers on commitment for full broad trait (measured by 24 items) and simplified broad trait (measured by 6 items), respectively. These findings, which strongly support Hypothesis-7, which states that social workers with the broad traits will positively affect their commitment.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The results derived from the structural equation modeling provide compelling evidence supporting the theoretical framework posited in this study, which integrates the traits of servant leadership into the professional practice of social workers. The analysis not only validates the proposed hypotheses but also offers insightful implications for enhancing the commitment and satisfaction of social workers in their professional roles.

The study underscores the significance of servant leadership traits - namely, commitment, humility, resilience, integrity, service, and teamwork - in shaping social workers' professional identities and practices as stated in Hypothesis-1. The traits enhance social workers' identification with their professionalism which is crucial for maintaining motivation and engagement in their roles.

The significant effect of broad traits on shared vision (Hypothesis-2) highlights the positive effects of social workers with the six traits in this study on shared vision of the organization. Social workers who share a vision with their organization will lead to job satisfaction (Hypothesis-3) and professional identification (Hypothesis 4), social workers should attach importance to acquiring and developing the traits and shared vision.

Long term commitment of social workers is positively enhanced by Professional identification (Hypothesis-5), job satisfaction (Hypothesis-6) and traits (Hypothesis-7). These findings have important implications for organizational leaders and policy makers seeking to improve retention and stability within social work agencies.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study illustrates the profound impact of servant leadership traits on the professional practice of social workers. This finding has concurred with the status quo of many researchers' finding for the deficiency of social worker status and recognition in China compared with western countries. By fostering a work environment that emphasizes these traits, social work organizations can enhance job satisfaction, encourage professional identification, and strengthen commitment among their staff. These findings contribute to the theoretical literature on servant leadership and social work and offer practical guidance for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of social work practices for the social work field in China in particular. Future research should explore these relationships across different cultural and organizational contexts to generalize these findings more broadly within the field of social work.

## 8. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The study provides valuable insights into the relationship between traits, shared vision, professionalism identification, job satisfaction and professional commitment among social workers. However, there are the following limitations.

First, the study's participants are drawn exclusively from social workers in China. Cultural and societal norms can significantly influence professional behaviours and attitudes towards work, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include diverse geographical locations and cultural contexts to determine if the observed relationships hold across different global settings.

Second, the search utilized a cross-sectional survey design. The results only support the proposed causal relationships between the variables. Longitudinal studies are recommended to observe how these relationships develop over time and to better understand the causal directions of the relationships.

By addressing these limitations, future research can enhance our understanding of the dynamic interplay between individual traits and professional outcomes in social work, contributing to developing more effective strategies for workforce development and management in this vital field.

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