# A review of research on adolescents' sense of responsibility and its cultivation

# Masao Yamamoto<sup>1, a, \*</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>Japan Youth Development Association,6-46 Kagurazaka, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo,162-0825, Japan a.masao\_y1999@yahoo.com \*Corresponding Author

Abstract: In recent years, research on the connotation, structure, formation mechanism, and cultivation of the sense of responsibility has yielded some beneficial results. However, there are still many issues in the definition of concepts, structural division, demarcation of research scope, and selection of research methods. This article comprehensively reviews the research status of adolescents' sense of responsibility in China, with the expectation of deepening the related research on the cultivation of adolescents' sense of responsibility.

Keywords: Adolescents, Sense of Responsibility, Cultivation Research

# 1. Introduction

The "National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020)" has prioritized the cultivation of adolescents' social responsibility as the foremost focus of quality education. This requires that in the new era, we must pay attention to the cultivation of adolescents' sense of responsibility. This paper reviews the main content of current research on adolescents' sense of responsibility and its cultivation, points out the existing problems in the research, and proposes corrective strategies.

# 2. The sense of responsibility of Chinese adolescents

#### 2.1. The connotation of sense of responsibility

The sense of responsibility is a product of individual socialization, and it involves the moral perception and emotional inclinations of both individuals and human groups. The \*Modern Chinese Dictionary\* defines "sense of responsibility" as "the feeling of doing one's duty well, also known as 'responsibility'" [1]. The \*Comprehensive Psychological Dictionary\* points out that the sense of responsibility is "the emotional experience generated by an individual's proactive and responsible attitude towards completing moral tasks in moral activities. It reflects the individual's positive emotional experience and clear attribution to undertaking tasks, determining the degree of completion of moral tasks and the extent to which an individual feels guilty when tasks are not completed" [2].

Reviewing the existing research literature, scholars have several representative views on the interpretation of the sense of responsibility:

#### 2.1.1. The affective experience perspective

Proponents of this view tend to regard the sense of responsibility as an emotional experience. They argue that the sense of responsibility refers to an individual's emotional attitude and inner experience of consciously doing their duty well and voluntarily taking responsibility for mistakes and their consequences. It is a higher-level and complex social emotion [3]. This sense of responsibility encompasses not only the responsibility towards human society but also towards oneself. During the process of a responsibility-related event, an individual may develop different emotional attitudes depending on whether their actions, the process, and the outcomes align with their inner needs [4].

#### 2.1.2. Value perspective

Proponents argue that a sense of social responsibility falls within the realm of value judgment. It exists in the relationships between the self and others, society, and nature, and is a concentrated manifestation of an individual's psychological inclinations and moral qualities [5]. From a substantive social perspective, a sense of responsibility ultimately reflects the relationship between the individual and society, encompassing both self-worth and social value [6].

## 2.1.3. Moral internalization perspective

Advocates believe that the emergence of a sense of responsibility is the process of fulfilling moral obligations. It is the result of an individual's respect and recognition of moral norms based on an understanding of moral principles and is also the process of internalizing moral norms within the individual [7]. A sense of responsibility is an individual's experience of the moral responsibilities they should undertake, a process of internalization based on moral perception [8].

### 2.1.4. Socialization essence perspective

Those who hold this view consider that responsibility has an essential nature of socialization. From a societal standpoint, responsibility is a behavior that humans undertake in accordance with the objective requirements of natural and social laws. It has two tendencies: being responsible to society and being responsible to oneself [9].

### 2.2. The structure of adolescents' sense of responsibility

The division of the structure of adolescents' sense of responsibility has different criteria and follows different orientations. The main representative views are as follows:

Based on the psychological structure and manifestations of the sense of responsibility, there are three-dimensional, four-dimensional, and five-dimensional structures. The three dimensions refer to responsibility cognition, responsibility emotion, and responsibility behavior [10]. The four dimensions include responsibility cognition, responsibility emotion, responsibility will, and responsibility behavior [11][12]. The five dimensions consist of responsibility cognition, responsibility emotion, responsibility behavior, responsibility behavior, responsibility motivation, and responsibility ability [13].

According to the subject of responsibility, responsibility can mainly be divided into personal responsibility, collective responsibility, and social responsibility [14]. It can be inferred that the sense of responsibility is mainly composed of personal sense of responsibility, collective sense of responsibility, and social sense of responsibility.

Based on the object of responsibility, responsibility can mainly be divided into social responsibility, responsibility to others, and personal responsibility [15]. It can be inferred that the sense of responsibility is mainly composed of social sense of responsibility, sense of responsibility to others, and personal sense of responsibility.

According to the fields involved in responsibility activities, responsibility can be divided into social morality responsibility, national responsibility, political responsibility, economic responsibility, cultural responsibility, professional (expected professional) responsibility, and learning responsibility, etc. [16]. It can be inferred that the sense of responsibility can be divided into social morality sense of responsibility, political sense of responsibility, economic sense of responsibility, cultural sense of responsibility, professional (expected professional) sense of responsibility, and learning sense of responsibility, cultural sense of responsibility, political sense of responsibility, economic sense of responsibility, cultural sense of responsibility, professional (expected professional) sense of responsibility, and learning sense of responsibility, etc.

Based on the degree of compulsion in undertaking obligations, responsibility can be divided into legal responsibility and moral responsibility [17]. It can be inferred that the sense of responsibility includes two aspects: legal sense of responsibility and moral sense of responsibility.

#### 2.3. The formation mechanism of adolescents' sense of responsibility

#### 2.3.1. From the perspective of moral education

The foundational capacity for moral cognition and the intrinsic driving force of moral emotion jointly promote the formation of adolescents' sense of responsibility. Scholars have pointed out that the general

mechanism for the formation of students' social responsibility is the development of moral cognitive abilities and the emergence of moral emotions. The development of moral cognitive abilities is a prerequisite for the emergence of social responsibility, while the intrinsic mechanism of moral emotion generation determines the formation of social responsibility [18].

# 2.3.2. From the perspective of positive psychology

Scholars have explored the impact of autonomous regulation on middle school students' responsibility undertaking, self-conscious emotional experiences, responsibility valuation, and persistence in responsible behaviors. Autonomous regulation plays a significant role in adolescents' responsibility judgment, motivation, and characteristics, thereby influencing the formation of their sense of responsibility. Research indicates that students with autonomous regulation assign higher value assessments to the responsibility activities they participate in. They persist longer in monotonous responsibility activities. Their state self-esteem is less affected by feedback from activities, and they are more willing to take responsibility and less likely to make excuses after failing to fulfill their duties [19].

# 2.3.3. From an integrated perspective of moral education and psychology

The sense of responsibility in adolescents emerges in the context of moral development and the awakening of self-awareness. Scholars have noted that the internal generation mechanism of social responsibility in adolescents includes three aspects: motivational mechanisms, psychological mechanisms, and capability mechanisms. The pursuit of self-actualization by adolescents drives the development of social responsibility. The internal psychological mechanism encompasses responsibility cognition and emotion, which are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The internal capability mechanism includes the continuously developing and maturing self-awareness, moral discernment ability, and responsibility will [20].

# 3. The cultivation of adolescents' sense of responsibility

# 3.1. The "Five-Dimensional and Multi-Element" model for adolescents' responsibility cultivation

The "Five-Dimensional and Multi-Element" model is constructed based on a variety of factors, maximizing the combined force of the "five dimensions" and effectively leveraging the roles of students as the main body, schools as the leading force, family support, social backing, and exemplary models.

# 3.1.1. Students

As the main practitioners of responsibility, adolescents must initiate the development of their sense of responsibility from within and complete it on the basis of autonomy, voluntariness, and spontaneity. The awakening of the awareness of being a responsible subject is related to the shaping of responsibility quality and, to a certain extent, serves as the inexhaustible driving force for maintaining this quality. Therefore, promoting the awakening of individual responsibility awareness, cultivating individual responsibility motivation, and stimulating the experience of fulfilling duties are the keys to cultivating adolescents' sense of responsibility.

# 3.1.2. Schools

Schools play a crucial role in the education of adolescents' sense of responsibility. Educational measures for cultivating adolescents' sense of responsibility in schools include: leveraging the inspirational role of role models, demonstrating the exemplary conduct of teachers, tapping into the moral education resources within subject teaching, utilizing the unique educational functions of the class collective, and fostering middle school students' awareness as the main body in management; implementing daily strategies for cultivating social responsibility; and actively organizing a variety of social practice activities [21].

In addition, some scholars have analyzed the cultivation of adolescents' sense of responsibility from both in-class and out-of-class perspectives. They suggest that in the classroom, the cultivation of responsibility should be reinforced through three approaches: infiltration within subject teaching processes, school-based curricula, and research-oriented learning activities. Outside the classroom, students' self-management capabilities should be enhanced, and activities should be organized to provide hands-on experiences [22].

#### 3.1.3. Families

Family education mainly serves to support individual students and schools in better cultivating students' sense of responsibility. Scholars have pointed out that through written communication (indirect dialogue) between students and parents, direct conversations, and students learning to understand how parents think about issues, adolescents' sense of responsibility towards their families can be strengthened in social practice [23]. Other scholars have suggested that regularly holding parent-teacher conferences and conducting themed activities that bring responsibility education into the home can also enhance adolescents' sense of responsibility [24].

## 3.1.4. Society

The main task of society is to create a positive atmosphere and environment for the cultivation of a sense of responsibility, to provide venues and conditions for experiential education, and to offer open practical opportunities. Community service, field trips, and ceremonial education are all social activities that can foster adolescents' sense of responsibility [25]. By rectifying the social ethos, a favorable educational atmosphere for social responsibility can also be created [26].

## 3.1.5. Significant others

Significant others mainly refer to teachers and peer groups, who set good examples and role models for the cultivation of a sense of responsibility. They inspire adolescents' motivation and direction for taking on responsibilities and provide exemplary guidance.

### 3.2. The "Cognition-Emotion-Will-Action" model for adolescents' responsibility cultivation

From the perspective of the psychological structure of the sense of responsibility, an individual's sense of responsibility is formed on the basis of enhancing responsibility cognition, stimulating responsibility emotion, strengthening responsibility will, maintaining a proper responsibility attitude, and practicing responsible behavior.

# 3.2.1. Enhancing responsibility cognition

Responsibility cognition refers to an individual's understanding at the level of responsibility knowledge, and the ability to perceive, judge, understand, and evaluate responsible behavior under certain circumstances [27]. Responsibility cognition precedes responsibility emotion and behavior and is a necessary prerequisite for an individual to be capable of undertaking responsibilities and obligations. Some scholars have analyzed the pathways for cultivating adolescents' responsibility cognition from the cognitive dimension. First, helping adolescents understand various social norms and the responsibilities of being a citizen. Second, assisting adolescents in clarifying their value concepts, forming a sense of responsibility, and applying it to responsible practices [28].

#### 3.2.2. Stimulating responsibility emotion

Responsibility emotion is an emotional experience that refers to an individual's proactive completion of tasks and fulfillment of responsibilities. Based on responsibility cognition, responsibility emotion serves to motivate, inspire, and evaluate responsible behavior. Some scholars argue that students' identification with responsibility emotion should be enhanced through observational learning and by setting up role models and exemplary cases [29]. Others suggest that adolescents should be given ample encouragement, love, and attention to help them establish role models, change attribution styles, and build self-confidence [30].

#### 3.2.3. Fulfilling responsible behavior

Responsible behavior refers to an individual's tendency to put their responsibilities and obligations into practice [31]. It is the external manifestation of an individual's sense of responsibility and a visible indicator for measuring and evaluating the level of responsibility. Scholars believe that role-playing methods should be employed and practical training scenarios should be created to enhance adolescents' ability to execute responsible behavior [32].

# 4. Problems and solutions in adolescent responsibility research

### 4.1. Existing problems

#### 4.1.1. Vague concepts and disordered structure in research on adolescents' responsibility

In previous studies, there has been no consensus on the connotations of responsibility and sense of responsibility. Researchers generally categorize the definitions of responsibility into emotional experience, value, moral internalization, and socialization essence. The emotional experience definition is interpreted from a psychological perspective, the moral internalization definition is understood from ethical and moral education perspectives, and the value and socialization essence definitions are determined from a philosophical standpoint. The ambiguity in the definition of responsibility arises from its involvement in a wide range of fields; it would be one-sided and autocratic to explain it solely from the perspective of any single discipline.

The reasons for the divergent structures of responsibility mainly stem from differences in theoretical construction, object classification, and research methods. Firstly, different theoretical constructions lead to different classifications of responsibility structures: Early researchers generally first categorized the dimensions of responsibility theoretically, dividing it into three dimensions (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responsibility), four dimensions (cognitive, emotional, volitional, and behavioral responsibility), and five dimensions (cognitive, emotional, behavioral, motivational, and capability responsibility) based on psychological structure and processes. Secondly, different dimensions of responsibility relationship objects result in different classifications of responsibility structures: Some scholars divide young children's responsibility into six dimensions: self, others, group, task, commitment, and fault [33]; others divide it into self-responsibility, family responsibility into self-responsibility, family responsibility towards others, professional responsibility, group responsibility, family responsibility towards others, professional responsibility, group responsibility, and social responsibility [35]. Lastly, different research methods lead to different classifications of responsibility structures: There are two common types of empirical research, "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches [36].

#### 4.1.2. Adolescent responsibility research focuses on theory but neglects practice

In the existing research findings, the study of responsibility has broken through the single mode and shows a diversified trend, mainly based on questionnaire surveys and supplemented by various qualitative research methods. However, theoretical speculation and qualitative research still hold a clear dominant position, while practical strategies and empirical research, especially standardized empirical research results, are relatively rare.

As the primary method in responsibility research, questionnaire surveys also have certain scientific flaws in the research process: for example, the construction of questionnaires, the selection of survey participants, the reliability and validity of the research, as well as the depth and breadth of the research, are all open to debate. Of course, as one of the quantitative research methods, the questionnaire survey method still appears somewhat limited in the overall methods of responsibility research. Other empirical research methods such as observation, interview, testing, case study, and experimental methods are rarely seen in the study of responsibility. Among qualitative research methods, only historical research and interview surveys are more commonly used, while participatory observation and action research methods are virtually absent.

# 4.2. Strategies for resolution

# 4.2.1. Deepen research content and clarify structural division.

The lack of consensus on the concept of responsibility is a problem pointed out by many researchers. Different perspectives have led to various definitions. Since responsibility is a social concept, its connotation must be interpreted within a social context. Postmodernism emphasizes that the development of things is inherently complex and constructive, with non-linear and generative thinking being the primary approach to problem-solving. Defining the concept of responsibility in specific contexts and concretizing it within those contexts could be a viable method.

The structural division of contemporary adolescents' sense of responsibility is an important aspect of responsibility research. The confusion in structural division in previous studies has greatly hindered the development of responsibility research. Integrating interdisciplinary concepts and the idea of socialized responsibility attributes into responsibility research represents a breakthrough in this field.

The most crucial step, however, is to improve the cultivation mechanism for adolescents' sense of responsibility. Building an effective mechanism for cultivating adolescents' sense of responsibility mainly involves enhancing the autonomy of the targets of cultivation. The lack of autonomy among the targets of cultivation is an issue that cannot be overlooked in previous studies. Shifting from "We need to cultivate adolescents' sense of responsibility" to "Helping adolescents cultivate their sense of responsibility" or "Promoting the awakening of adolescents' autonomous awareness of responsibility" is a problem that should be given more attention in the current responsibility cultivation mechanism.

How can adolescents be encouraged to independently enhance their level of responsibility? This requires adolescents to strengthen their self-concept, clarify their personal responsibilities, and enhance their sense of self-worth. Psychological research indicates that self-appreciation and self-evaluation are important factors influencing an individual's sense of responsibility. The stronger an individual's sense of a particular role, the more likely they are to take on the corresponding responsibilities associated with that role. This necessitates the reinforcement of adolescents' self-concept. A sense of self-worth helps to awaken an individual's awareness of taking on responsibilities and drives the motivation for responsibility-taking; therefore, enhancing the sense of self-worth is an important strategy for improving adolescents' level of responsibility.

#### 4.2.2. Optimize research methods to balance qualitative and quantitative aspects

In previous studies, the questionnaire method has been predominant. However, issues related to questionnaire construction, survey reliability and validity, selection of participants, and the depth and scope of the research have gradually revealed problems with the reliability and validity of the studies. In future research, the technicality and accuracy of questionnaire construction should be enhanced, and data and scales should be handled with caution to ensure the scientific and effective nature of the questionnaires. The selection of survey participants should be appropriate, considering not only the quantity but also factors such as age, region, gender, background, and cultural context to achieve an effective combination of comprehensiveness and diversity. In terms of research depth and breadth, a multi-factor analysis approach from a multidisciplinary perspective should be adopted to analyze the current state and causes of adolescents' lack of responsibility. The study of responsibility should be situated within the current specific social environment and explored within the system of cultural symbols and social history.

In existing research, the over-reliance on questionnaire-based quantitative methods has led to a lack of diversity, while the scope of qualitative research methods, such as historical research and interviews, needs to be expanded. Methods like experimental design, observation, interviews, case analysis, behavioral analysis, and content analysis can all be incorporated into the research through various means. Therefore, in future research, the following combinations can be employed: integrating observation with behavioral analysis, interviews with case analysis, and questionnaires with experimental methods. It is essential not only to comprehensively apply both qualitative and quantitative research methods but also to integrate integrative thinking into the research process according to different research questions, aiming to achieve the optimal use of each method and maximize their value in the study.

# 5. Conclusion

Adolescents are the future and hope of the nation, and cultivating their sense of social responsibility is one of the important goals of education. The \*National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020) \* places the cultivation of adolescents' sense of responsibility at the forefront of quality education, highlighting its significance. This paper has conducted an in-depth exploration of the connotation, structure, and formation mechanisms of adolescents' sense of responsibility, reviewed the main content of current research, identified existing issues, and proposed corresponding solutions.

The research findings indicate that a sense of responsibility is not only the result of emotional experience, value judgment, and moral internalization, but also a product of the interaction between individuals and society during the socialization process. The structure of adolescents' sense of responsibility is complex and diverse, involving multiple dimensions such as cognition, emotion, behavior, motivation, and capability, and is closely related to different responsibility subjects, including the individual, the collective, and society. Its formation mechanisms are influenced by various factors, including moral cognition, emotional experience, the awakening of self-awareness, and the external environment.

In terms of cultivating adolescents' sense of responsibility, the "Five-Dimensional and Multi-Element" cultivation model and the "Cognition–Emotion–Will–Action" cultivation model have been proposed. These models emphasize the collaborative role of student initiative, school leadership, family cooperation, social support, and exemplary role models, focusing on systematic cultivation from multiple dimensions, including cognition, emotion, willpower, and behavior. However, current research still faces issues such as vague concepts, disordered structural division, overemphasis on theory at the expense of practice, and a preference for qualitative over empirical research. Further efforts are needed to deepen research content and optimize research methods to achieve a balance between qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Future research should focus more on clarifying and concretizing the concept of responsibility, integrating perspectives from multiple disciplines to construct a more scientific and rational model of responsibility structure. It is also essential to strengthen empirical research, employing a variety of research methods to delve into the current state, influencing factors, and developmental patterns of adolescents' sense of responsibility. In addition, improving the cultivation mechanism for adolescents' sense of responsibility, enhancing their autonomy, and boosting their self-concept and sense of self-worth are key to improving the effectiveness of responsibility cultivation.

In summary, the cultivation of adolescents' sense of responsibility is a systemic project that requires the joint efforts of families, schools, society, and adolescents themselves. Through scientific research and effective practice, we can lay a solid foundation for the comprehensive development of adolescents, helping them grow into responsible citizens who contribute to social harmony and progress.

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