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Youth work, prosocial behaviour, and micro-foundation of working-class solidarity among vocational school students in China

Ngai Pun ^a, Bryant P. H. Hui ^b and Anita Koo ^c

^aDepartment of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong; ^bDepartment of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong; ^cDepartment of Sociology, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

Despite the large number of working-class students having to work while attending schools, their work experience and the potential of class solidarity have been largely unaddressed. By bringing in a social psychological perspective, this article revives the sociological debates of working-class solidarity and challenges the defeatist view of solidarity since the neoliberal turn of the global economy. This article comprises two studies. In Study 1, a *working-class solidarity measure* (WCSM) was developed through interviews, followed by factor-analysis of a vocational school sample in China ($n = 509$). In Study 2, we validated the factor structure of the WCSM and adopted structural equation modelling to show that prosocial behaviour positively predicted solidarity among vocational school students ($n = 2534$). Contrary to the understanding that the working-class is divisive and fragmentary, our work shows that working-class solidarity can be built and consolidated through layers of prosocial behaviours by students with work experience.

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China; prosocial behaviour; work experience; working-class solidarity; youth

Introduction

Despite the large number of working-class students having to work while attending schools, their work experience has been largely unaddressed, not to mention the potential of class solidarity, at the time when class analysis becomes controversial or is considered as outmoded in sociological studies (Beck 1992; Clark and Martin Lipset 1991; Savage 2003). Even when youth employment became a subject of study, students' work experience was often considered to be detrimental to human agency, especially in an unsecure or precarious labour market (e.g. Robert and Saar 2012; Weiss, Klein, and Grauenhorst 2014). Given that nearly 50% of working-class youth are working under increasingly precarious working conditions and subject to a fluctuating labour market (Hui et al. 2020), our study contributes to merge both sociological and social psychological perspectives to explore the potential of positive outcomes of youth prosocial behaviour in relation to work (Fetchenhauer et al. 2006), foregrounding a micro-foundation of working-class solidarity by moving beyond classic Marxist debates on class solidarity focusing only on structural, organisational, or institutional processes, and demonstrating alternative social value transgressing the logic of capital (Skeggs 2014; Qiu, Chung, and; Pun 2022).

CONTACT Anita Koo  anitakoo@hkbu.edu.hk  Department of Sociology, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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Notwithstanding the controversy or denial of class analysis, sociological theories help us understand how the class background and socio-economic status of individuals predict one's behavioural tendency, such as schooling, work and employment, class belonging and ideological orientation (Bengtsson, Berglund, and Oskarson 2013; Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992; Kalleberg 2009; Surridge 2007; Wright 1997). Despite the Durkheim's sense of 'collective effervescence' describing solidarity's mercurial quality (Crow 2010), these sociological debates enhance our design of a *working-class solidarity measure* (WCSM) which captures seven elements of the 'working-class solidarity' concept, including social ties, shared sentiments, shared interest, common values, mutual support, joint actions, as well as interaction, communications and cooperation (Doellgast, Lillie, and Pulignano 2018; Fantasia 1995; Voss and Sherman 2000).

Moreover, various social psychological studies explore the social values of individuals, such as altruistic sentiments, prosocial behaviour, and social solidarity (Drinkard 2017; Lindenberg et al. 2006; Simpson and Willer 2015). Prosocial behaviour is broadly conceptualised as the willingness to help, be fair and friendly to others, and is considered the fertile soil for nurturing solidarity at everyday level (Drinkard 2017; Hui et al. 2020), while witnessing youth's development from school to work. For those lacking resources and working under precarious conditions, prosocial values can generate a web of connections vital for students to survive in a precarious living condition (e.g. Andreoni 2001; Piff and Moskowitz 2017). In a recent quantitative study (Hui et al. 2020), a positive link between the work experience of the working-class youth and their prosocial behaviour has been constructed. Findings of the study have demonstrated that 'having less, giving more' is possible, and challenged the bias and discrimination that lower-class people are less prosocial and tend to prioritise self-interest over the benefits of others due to fewer resources, greater exposure to precarity, and severe competition.

Engaging in the sociological debates, this study further builds a link between prosocial behaviour and class solidarity among working-class youth by extending the study of solidarity from workplace, community, to school which as a significant institution serves as a bedrock for nurturing class solidarity and identity but is often neglected in the class analysis (Reay 2017). Often socially stigmatised as 'losers' in China's educational system and treated unfairly (Ling 2015; Pun and Koo 2019; Woronov 2015), working-class vocational school students are nevertheless givers to both in-group and out-group individuals. During our fieldwork between 2017 and 2019, we observed a multiplicity of their prosocial behaviours in the forms of voluntary activities, charity donations via social media platforms, and fair pay campaigns for the benefit of their colleagues. The paradoxical concept of 'having less, giving more' (Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009; Piff et al. 2010) is rooted in a highly competitive society in which these working-class youth have no other resources to rely on, except for their solidarity. With less in hand and thus greater need for mutual support, they must cooperate with each other in schools and workplaces to survive severe market competition (Sennett 2012; Skeggs 2014). In this vein, Lu, Koo, and Pun (2019) discovered that prosocial behaviours are an everyday practice of the working youth embedded in specific organisational settings or institutional bases. This encouraged us to conceptualise a micro-foundation of social values among the working-class youth, construct a *working class solidarity measure* (WCSM) and test it using quantitative methods in this article. We piloted this quantitative study to test whether prosocial behaviours of the working-class youth would strengthen social relationships and tighten bonds of mutual support, thereby contributing to the formation of working-class solidarity or not. In this article, we have broken down the concept of prosocial behaviour into three layers: daily helping, school volunteering, and school society activities. We systematically studied the prosocial behaviours of students in the context of daily activities, school life, and community, so as to examine the relations between these behaviours and working-class solidarity.

Debates on working-class solidarity

Working-class solidarity is often conceived as a Marxist formulation, which adopts a macro-structural approach to explain class conflict, social grievance, and economic crisis directly connected to the

social transformation of capitalist society (Bloemraad, Silva, and Voss 2016; Fantasia and Voss 2004). Taking a class-based worldview, Marxist studies emphasise historical materialism and the effects of economic crisis as a result of the modern capitalist system and mode of production, which create the basis to unite working-class who share common interests and worldview or values to rebuild a new society (Thompson 1991). As a classic theoretical question in sociology, working-class solidarity sparked heated debates between the 19th century and late 20th century (Fantasia 1995; Featherstone 2012; Voss and Sherman 2000). The discussion became obsolete when the coming of a post-industrial (Bell 1973), consumer (Edsforth 1987), and risk society (Beck 1992) was predicted, as social transformation in the West was supposed to have a negative structural effect on class force and put an end of working-class solidarity (Gorz 1994). Work experience in contemporary society is often taken as embodying a fragmented workforce due to divisions among workers on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, education, skill, and other differences. Recent debates on labour precarity and the 'precarious class' have precluded discussions on positive outcomes from work experience and work solidarity (Standing 2011, 2017).

In response to the general view that working-class solidarity is a mission impossible, a few political and sociological scholars strived to re-articulate the notion (Bloemraad, Silva, and Voss 2016; Doellgast, Lillie, and Pulignano 2018; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Morgan and Pulignano 2020). Among these studies, Fantasia (1988, 1995) followed the Marxist tradition of historical materialism and further developed the concept of 'cultures of solidarity', which stated that working-class solidarity could be formed in times of crisis. In other words, when the working-class is in struggle, it becomes united and constitutes itself as a class force. In a dialogue with E. P. Thompson, Fantasia (1995) also stressed that daily practices, mutual support, shared sentiments, and the process of organisational building are all central to the sustenance of class cohesion. Thus, his concept of 'cultures of solidarity' focused on how everyday practices, human sentiments, condensed interaction and communication were constructed inter-subjectively and in relation to opposition during acute industrial conflicts (Fantasia 1995).

Despite the overwhelming pessimism over the decline of the contemporary global working-class movement, many studies employed a comparative approach and historical perspective to re-establish the importance of community dynamics, social ties, cooperation, organisational capacity, social bonding along lines of gender and ethnicity, as well as shared sentiments in shaping collective actions and class solidarity (Glucksmann 2005; Skeggs 2013). For example, Kim Voss moved beyond the Marxist assumption that working-class formation develops automatically with productive forces and are only confined to the point of production, stating that 'students of class formation now point out that collective action is inherently difficult, that it requires resources and organisational capacity as well as shared grievances and generalised discontent' (Voss 1988, 330). Accordingly, working-class solidarity has been reconceptualised as a mobilisation process that entails common interests, social ties and bonding, as well as shared sentiments and values. It represents the general interest of labour at work, and is the foundation of class-based action at both individual and collective levels (Bloemraad, Silva, and Voss 2016; Fantasia and Voss 2004). Morgan and Pulignano (2020, 18) directly pointed out, 'this is not the end of solidarity' but 'the question of what sort of solidarities are now emerging and how'. Using quantitative methods, Bengtsson, Berglund, and Oskarson (2013) confirmed that class positions are essential to the understanding of ideological orientation and the working class is supposed to be more left-wing oriented, which means more class solidarity, than the service class because of less work autonomy and more physically demand job.

In short, the above studies refuse to take 'the end of working-class solidarity' in the contemporary society and provide a more sophisticated analysis looking at how discursive, organisational and institutional factors shape or misshape class solidarity. They argued that alternative forms of solidarity were possible in attempts of social movement unionism in general (Doellgast, Lillie, and Pulignano 2018), and in the organising of the migrant labour community in particular (Milkman 2018). Cultures of solidarity were sometimes observed in various forms of organisation and mobilisation in the community and on an every-day level,

with the aim of moving beyond conventional business unionism (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Featherstone 2012). Yet, there are still missing pieces to the puzzle: Is working-class solidarity feasible in the terrain of school, and in what way? Could human agency and subjectivity of the working-class be operating in schools? In what ways could we generate a systematic study for the topic using quantitative measurement? After all, Morgan and Pulignano (2020) rightly put it, identifying solidarities at work ultimately requires an empirical account in particular contexts instead of pure thinking.

Bringing in the Global South experience, especially the findings in China, this article revisits the social theories on solidarity to construct a *working-class solidarity measure* (WCSM) and assesses its validity in everyday practices. In China, students in vocational high schools are mainly from working-class or rural families (Ling 2015; Pun and Koo 2019; Woronov 2015). Starting from the 1980s, the Chinese state government has made great efforts of expanding vocational education to maintain the supply of skilled and productive labour for the country's industrial advancement (Koo 2016). Since China joined the WTO at the turn of the century, the state took a heavy-handed role in steering the vocation education and issued a series of policies to offer tuition reductions and subsidies at vocational schools to attract students. Over the years, the low admission requirements of such schools and academic inflation in society have channelled a large number of disadvantaged youths to vocational training, preparing them to become the new working-class subjects in the manufacturing and service sectors (Koo 2016; Woronov 2015). For working-class youths who have fewer chances and resources for college and university education, vocational schools seem the most available and affordable option to gain additional education and training beyond the compulsory level of schooling, thereby equipping them for China's rise into a global economic power (Pun and Qiu 2020).

In this regard, vocational education is not only the cradle of working-class subjectivity, but also the multi-sites for collective organising and solidarity. Solidarity is observed in a multiplicity of prosocial behaviours by the working-class youth both in school and the workplace, which demonstrates their potential for mutual support. To test the concept, we developed a WCSM and looked into the structural and organisational factors in everyday practices. We contributed to the study of the formation of class-based solidarity by defining solidarity as a set of acts, sentiments, and values that unites the working-class. We tap the concept with seven elements, namely shared interests, social ties, mutual support, shared sentiments, joint actions, common values, as well as interactions, communications and cooperation at work (see Table 1). We then explored the effect of the three layers of prosocial behaviours on working-class solidarity, and adopted the structural equation model to test whether Chinese vocational school students could nurture class-based solidarity. In short, prosocial behaviour is the key to extending Marxist study of working-class solidarity from a macro-level to a micro-level rooted in everyday practices of the working-class youth whose agency could be measured and studied.

Table 1. Factor loadings of the items for the working-class solidarity measure ($N = 509$).

Item	Loading
(1) Apart from work, you and your colleagues usually do other activities together (social ties).	.73
(2) When being upset at work, your colleagues and you will share each other's troubles (shared sentiments).	.70
(3) When you are in trouble, your colleagues will help you (mutual support).	.75
(4) When your colleagues are in trouble, you will help your colleagues (mutual support).	.74
(5) Your colleagues and you will take action together to fight for welfare at work (joint actions).	.70
(6) Your colleagues and you have similar or same views on the company (shared interests).	.62
(7) As a whole, you believe that your colleagues' and your benefits in the company are the same (shared interests).	.65
(8) Both your colleagues and you believe in the view that being labour is glorious (common values).	.73
(9) Both your colleagues and you believe that workers should be united among themselves (common values).	.72
(10) Your colleagues and you will discuss how to solve problems at work (interactions, communications, and mutual help at work).	.76

Study 1: Developing working-class solidarity measure (WCSM)

Participants and procedure

The data of this pilot study were collected from two samples composing of vocational college students in Guizhou ($n = 548$) and Lanzhou ($n = 366$) provinces, China. We invited students to fill in a self-administered online survey during our field trips to two colleges in June 2018. All participants were asked to grant online informed consent before completing the survey with their computers or mobile devices on a voluntary basis. We embedded a screening question so that only those who had part-time work or internship experience would be directed to respond to working-class solidarity items. As a result, the final dataset used for the present study ($N = 509$) comprised the two vocational college samples from Guizhou ($n = 351$) and Lanzhou ($n = 158$), respectively¹. Over 86% of the participants were from rural areas (57% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.86$, $SD = 1.74$, $\text{range}_{\text{age}} = 17\text{--}27$).

Measure

Working-class solidarity measure (WCSM). Employing a theory-driven approach, the WCSM was developed based on the literature review, conceptualisation of working-class solidarity, and supplemented by conducting in-depth interviews with 30 students (aged between 17 and 21) and two focus group discussions with 18 students (aged between 17 and 21) in two vocational colleges, so as to establish descriptive items for work-related solidarity behaviours in students' part-time work or internship experience. Consequently, a total of 10 items in both Chinese and English were used to tap the seven elements of working-class solidarity, namely social ties, shared sentiments, mutual support, joint actions, shared interests, common values, as well as interactions, communications and cooperation at work. Sample items included 'Your colleagues and you have similar or same views on the company' (shared interests), 'Both your colleagues and you believe in the view that being labour is glorious' (common values), and 'Your colleagues and you will discuss how to solve problems at work' (interactions, communications, and cooperation at work) (see Table 1). Students' responses were anchored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Data analysis

After establishing the WCSM, we proceeded to investigate its factor structure. For this purpose, we first performed the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity to evaluate the data suitability for our structure detection and whether a factor analysis might be useful with our data. Specifically, principal component analysis was conducted on the 10 items with oblique rotation. The Cattell's Scree Test and parallel analysis were used to determine the number of factors. All statistical analysis was conducted using the IBM SPSS Version 26.0.

Results

The results of the KMO measure (.93) and the Bartlett's test ($p < .001$) indicated that factor analysis was probably useful with our data. Both the Cattell's Scree Test and parallel analysis suggested a one-factor model with an eigenvalue of 5.05, accounting for 50.49% of the total variance. Table 1 shows the factor loadings of the 10 items (ranging from .62 to .76), which tapped the seven aforementioned elements of working-class solidarity. The Cronbach's α for the WCSM in the present study was .89, with all item-total correlations being positive.

Study 2: Predicting working-class solidarity from prosocial behaviours

Participants and procedure

Study 2 was the quantitative arm of a large-scale research project investigating the process of 'learning-to-labour' among youth from vocational colleges in China. The present dataset was collected from March to May 2019, which was a cross-sectional survey of vocational colleges students aged 16 or above from nine vocational schools located in the urban areas of six Chinese provinces, namely, Gansu, Guangdong, Hubei, Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi, and Zhejiang. Across the nine colleges, data collected on age, gender ratio, hukou, and work experience share more commonalities than differences. Principals and teachers from these colleges agreed to join the study and facilitated data collection after attending a conference for vocational college educators in 2017 or our team conducted field work at the colleges. A total of 8638 students from the nine colleges took part in the study. Participants were asked to grant online informed consent before filling in our self-administered survey by using their computers or mobile devices on voluntary basis. To identify careless responses and ensure reliability (Maniaci and Rogge 2014; Meade and Bartholomew Craig 2012), we embedded four bogus items in the survey. After excluding those who answered two or more bogus items incorrectly and or completed our survey in less than 10 minutes, our cleaned sample consists of 5861 participants. Despite the limitation of non-probability sampling, this is a unique, high-quality dataset designed to address the significant theoretical questions we decided to investigate. For the purpose of the present study, the final dataset ($N = 2534$) only included those who had part-time work or internship experience (45% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 18.42$, $SD = 1.60$, $\text{range}_{\text{age}} = 16\text{--}27$).

Measures

Working-class solidarity

The 10-item WCSM from Study 1 was used to assess work-class solidarity among the youth in vocational colleges ($\alpha = .94$).

Daily helping

The 5-item Self-reported Altruism Scale was employed to tap helping behaviours on an everyday basis (Penner 2002; Penner et al. 1995). Participants responded on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) the frequency with which they have engaged in daily helping ($\alpha = .75$). Sample items included 'I have allowed someone to go ahead of me in a line (e.g. supermarket, copying machine, etc.)' and 'I have helped carry a stranger's belongings (e.g. books, parcels, etc.)'.

School volunteering

A single item 'I have participated in school volunteering work' was used to measure volunteering in schools. Respondents had to rate the frequency from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*).

School society activities

A single item 'I have participated in various society activities at school' was used to measure participation in school society activities. Respondents indicated the frequency of their participation on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*).

Work experience

A single item was included to understand if participants had part-time job experience during weekends, summer or winter vacations (yes or no), while another item was added to determine whether they had internship experience (yes or no).

Apart from the above measures, participants also reported their demographics information, including gender, age, and origin (i.e. whether the participants' official household registration hukou is rural or urban).

Data analysis

Following the scale development process of the WCSM, we validated its factor structure. To do this, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to examine the goodness of fit of another dataset to the one-factor model from Study 1. At this stage, the data reflected a hierarchical structure in which students were nested within the colleges. To account for data dependency, CFA was employed with a sandwich estimator to provide unbiased estimates of standard errors (Muthen and Satorra 1995). In addition, model fit was assessed using Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR), and Root-Mean-Square Errors of Approximation (RMSEA). A model with CFI > 0.90, SRMR < 0.08, and RMSEA < 0.08 is considered as an acceptable fit to the data (Hair et al. 2010). Next, we used the newly evaluated measurement model of WCSM to form a structural equation model (SEM) for the examination of our proposal model – specifically, the relationship between prosocial behaviour and working-class solidarity – among vocational college students in China. We preferred SEM to regression analysis, because SEM treats psychological constructs as latent variables and accounts for measurement error, while regression analysis treats them as manifest variables only (Iacobucci, Saldanha, and Deng 2007). Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among all variables were examined first. All statistical analysis was estimated using the Mplus 7.0.

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis

Results of CFA showed that the one-factor model provided an excellent goodness of fit on the present dataset, $\chi^2(45) = 15920.46$, $p < .001$, CFI = .99, SRMR = .02, RMSEA = .04. Standardized factor loadings of the 10 items ranged from .72 to .84 (with an average of .79) and were statistically significant, $ps < .001$. The Cronbach's α for the WCSM in the present study was .94. Hence, the CFA results confirmed the factorial validity of the WCSM among working-class youth in China.

Descriptive and correlational analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients for the variables of interest are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Participants from rural areas and urban areas accounted for 75% and 25% of total respondents respectively. Among them, 88% reported having part-time work experience. In other words, our sample primarily comprised working-class youth with a rural family background. In terms of bivariate correlations, the results showed that work-class solidarity was positively correlated with daily helping, $r(2534) = .23$, $p < .001$, school volunteering, $r(2534) = .16$, $p < .001$, and school society activities, $r(2534) = .17$, $p < .001$. These correlational results basically supported our hypotheses, which allowed us to test them using a more stringent structural equation model.

Structural equation model. SEM was performed to examine our hypotheses in one single model. The results showed that our proposed model fitted the data moderately well, $\chi^2(170) = 2080.72$, $p < .001$, CFI = .92, SRMR = .08, RMSEA = .07. Standardized factor loadings ranged from .39 to .84 and were statistically significant, $ps < .001$ (see Table 4). As shown in Figure 1, after controlling for the confounding variables of age, gender, hukou, and part-time job experience², Work-class solidarity was positively predicted by daily helping, $b = .26$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$, schooling volunteering, $b = .02$, $SE = .01$, $p = .006$, and school society activities, $b = .08$, $SE = .02$, $p = .001$. Therefore, all of our hypotheses were confirmed.

Discussion

In China, an increasing number of young people with disadvantaged backgrounds are being channelled into vocational schools before seeking their working-class employment in the growing

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for variables of interest in the confirmatory factor analysis.

	Mean (SD) or per cent		
	N = 2534	Males (n = 1396)	Females (n = 1138)
Age	18.42 (1.60)	18.41 (1.56)	18.43 (1.65)
Residence registration system (hukou)			
Rural	75%	75%	76%
Urban	25%	25%	24%
Part-time job experience			
Yes	88%	91%	85%
No	12%	9%	15%
Internship experience			
Yes	31%	30%	32%
No	69%	70%	68%
Daily helping	2.88 (0.80)	2.91 (0.81)	2.83 (0.79)
School volunteering	2.93 (1.16)	2.91 (1.18)	2.95 (1.14)
School society activities	3.28 (1.05)	3.29 (1.08)	3.26 (1.02)
Working-class solidarity	5.30 (0.94)	5.35 (0.98)	5.24 (0.88)

Table 3. Intercorrelations for the measures (N = 2534).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Age	—	.01	-.02	-.09***	.14***	.17***	.09***	.05**
Gender ^a		—	-.01	-.09***	-.05*	.02	-.01	-.06**
Hukou ^b			—	-.04*	-.01	-.00	.04*	-.02
Part-time job experience ^c				—	.06**	.05*	.02	.07***
Daily helping					.75	.49***	.41***	.23***
School volunteering						—	.52***	.16***
School society activities							—	.17***
Working-class solidarity								.94

Note. ^aMale = 1, female = 2. ^bRural = 1, urban = 2. ^cno job experience = 0, job experience = 1. The reliability coefficients are found along the diagonal line.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Unstandardized and standardised factor loadings of the structural equation model.

Parameter estimates	Unstandardized loading (SE)	Standardized loading
Working-class solidarity → Item s1	1.00	.76
Working-class solidarity → Item s2	1.02 (.02)***	.75
Working-class solidarity → Item s3	0.99 (.03)***	.81
Working-class solidarity → Item s4	1.00 (.03)***	.84
Working-class solidarity → Item s5	1.02 (.01)***	.81
Working-class solidarity → Item s6	0.93 (.02)***	.72
Working-class solidarity → Item s7	0.96 (.02)***	.71
Working-class solidarity → Item s8	1.02 (.04)***	.79
Working-class solidarity → Item s9	1.03 (.02)***	.82
Working-class solidarity → Item s10	1.02 (.03)***	.82
Daily helping → Item h1	1.00	.71
Daily helping → Item h2	0.64 (.06)***	.39
Daily helping → Item h3	0.95 (.03)***	.58
Daily helping → Item h4	1.20 (.04)***	.70
Daily helping → Item h5	1.04 (.03)***	.67

*** $p < .001$.

manufacturing and service sectors. During the years of training, many of them take up short- and long-term unpaid or underpaid internships to practice their learned skills (Pun and Koo 2019). Many of them also engage in various types of low-paid, precarious part-time jobs to financially support themselves during schooling. This article focuses on vocational school students who have work experience. In Study 1, we drew from the sharing of students who reflected on their work experience and behaviour during their part-time work or internship. Based on this, we developed the WCSM to

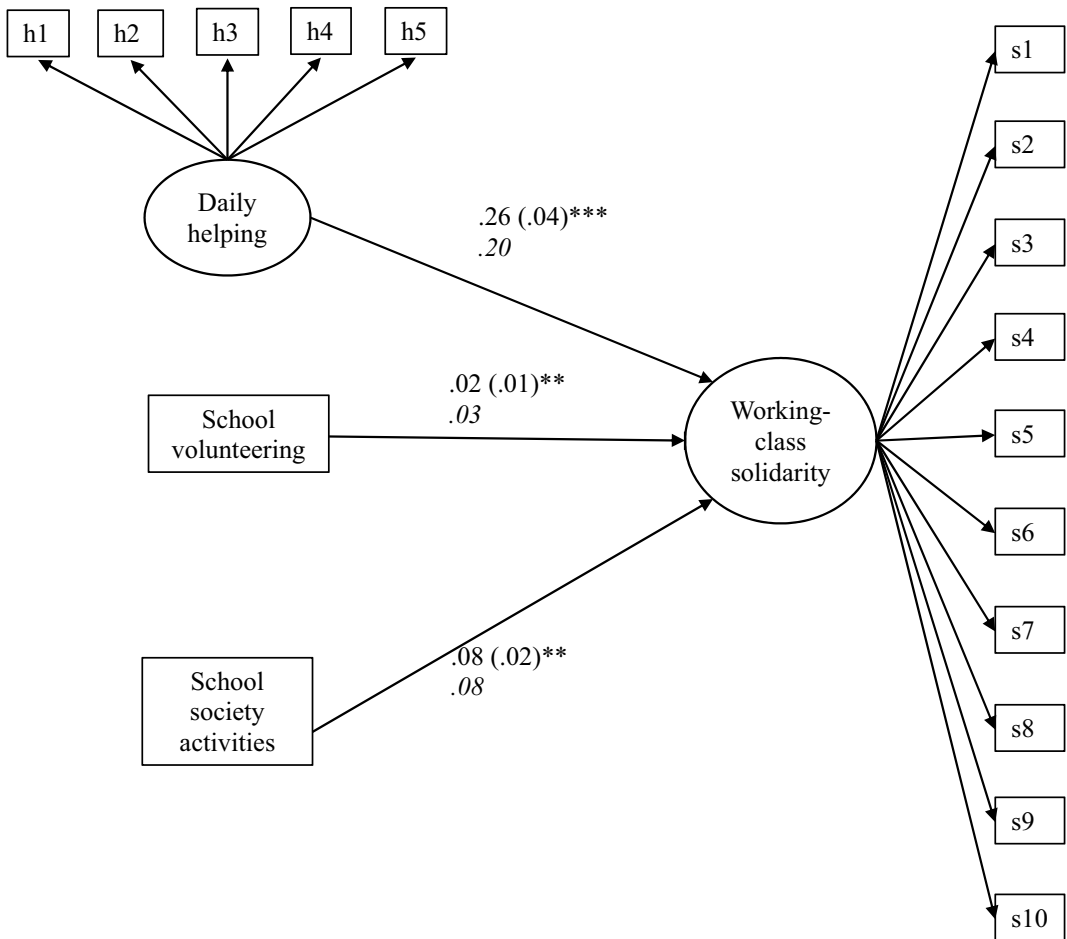


Figure 1. Structural equation model testing the effect of daily helping, school volunteering, and school society activities on working-class solidarity, after controlling for age, gender, hukou, and part-time job experience ($N = 2534$). Note: Daily helping is indicated by five items (i.e. h1–h5). Working-class solidarity is indicated by 10 items (i.e. s1–s10). Unstandardized (not italicised) and standardised (italicised) beta coefficients with standard errors in parentheses are presented. CFI = .92. SRMR = .08. RMSEA = .07. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

tap the seven elements of solidarity. Then, in Study 2, we discovered that students' engagement in daily helping, school volunteering, and school society activities positively predicted working-class solidarity. This strongly suggested that the working-class solidarity of vocational school students was formed and consolidated in everyday prosocial behaviour within the 'cultures of solidarity' in schools and communities (Kulz 2017).

Our study contributes to the understanding of working-class solidarity in several ways. Firstly, it developed the WCSM, which is an analytical and validated measure which includes the structural and organisational factors in the everyday practices of young student workers. The WCSM inclusively defines working-class solidarity as sets of common values, shared interests and sentiments that unite the working-class youth through interactions, communications and cooperation at work, mutual support, and joint actions. When vocational school students take up their internship, part-time or summer jobs, they deal with the tasks, problems and difficulties which are commonly shared by colleagues in the workplace. As suggested by Fantasia (1995), the intensive interactions, communications and cooperation between them at workplaces generate social ties, shared sentiments, and common values, which are central to the sustenance of social cohesion and solidarity. The

organisational settings allow the young workers to immerse themselves in the culture of solidarity while acquiring skills and knowledge related to employment. The cohesion and the collective awareness also make them realise the importance of mutual support and joint actions for problem-solving and protection among colleagues who share similarly poor labour conditions in the unequal employment structure (Morgan and Pulignano 2020; SurrIDGE 2007).

Our design of the WCSM aims to capture seven elements of the 'working-class solidarity' concept, which include social ties, shared sentiments, shared interest, common values, mutual support, joint actions, as well as interaction, communications and cooperation. These diversified but related elements of working-class solidarity range from workers' shared identifications and values to collective action; from workers' everyday work practices to their behaviours during crisis. In the study, we found that these elements are positively correlated to one another. Through principal component analysis/factor analysis, it was confirmed and then validated that all seven elements are adequately captured in the WCSM to indicate the working-class solidarity among working-class youth in China.

Our second contribution is that we confirmed the positive association between prosocial behaviour and working-class solidarity among Chinese vocational school students. In previous studies, Chinese vocational school students, especially those from poor families and those who work part-time, are found having a strong tendency to provide informal help and participate in school volunteering (Hui et al. 2020; Lu, Koo, and Pun 2019; Koo 2021). To build on these findings, the present study adopted the structural equation model and demonstrated that students' working-class solidarity is predicted and consolidated by three layers of prosocial behaviours, namely their engagement in daily helping, school volunteering, and school society activities.

Prosocial behaviour is broadly conceptualised as a willingness to help, be fair and friendly to others at the everyday level. Vocational school students, who are mainly from less well-off working-class families, tend to be more generous towards peers and strangers (Hui et al. 2020). As found in a qualitative study (Lu, Koo, and Pun 2019), students who have less are more willing to offer daily help because they know and understand the challenges faced by people from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds. They often share job information, tips for dealing with managers and bosses, as well as act collectively for fighting to get their wage paid. At the same time, they are confident that they can rely on their peers and neighbours for help. In this sense, their daily helping can inspire a sense of collectiveness, develop shared sentiments, and protect common interests through mutual support, even when it is relatively small material or emotional support to others. The sense of collectiveness and belief of reciprocity that derived and reinforced by daily helping glue young people together at schools and workplaces (Koo, 2021; Sennett 2012). In times of wage delayal or bullying at the workplace, the students often support each other to fight for their wage or economic compensation. Therefore, this layer of prosocial behaviour contributes to building and strengthening social ties, shared sentiments, shared interest, and mutual support, which are some of the key elements of working-class solidarity in the WCSM measure.

School volunteering is another common prosocial practice among Chinese vocational school students. During our field study, we came across various school volunteering projects, including second-hand clothes donation to rural families in mountain villages, and elderly home and orphanage visits during weekends. Apart from nurturing students' willingness to help, these volunteering activities organised by schools and student societies build and strengthen students' social ties and shared sentiments through upholding the mission of the group (Karr and Meijs 2006). Prosocial behaviour within an organisation or a group is one of the keys to achieve solidarity. When the helping actions or volunteering activities are taken out collectively through cooperation, this layer of prosocial behaviour is expected to additionally the social ties, common values, and joint actions of the working-class solidarity in our measure.

In our model, the third layer of prosocial behaviour is students' participation in school society activities. Students of Chinese vocational schools are encouraged to join different types of school clubs or societies, or even build their own associations based on their interests (Pun and Koo 2019).

Some societies are culturally-oriented, such as school radio stations or school magazines. Others focus on students' interests and skills specialities, such as cooking clubs and mobile apps development groups. Through these extra-curricular activities, students can meet, communicate and cooperate with others from different disciplines. Once or twice a year, members of these clubs or societies will connect together to perform their skills and demonstrate their creations in school-wide functions. Communication and cooperation will be further enhanced by significant interpersonal relations with group members, or by the observation that organisers engage in such relations (Sennett 2012). These opportunities for contact, interactions, and communications with group members, as well as the resulting close-knit networks facilitate the emergence of a shared identity and culture, norms of reciprocity, and cooperation for collectivity and solidarity (SurrIDGE 2007). In other words, students' active participation in school societies leads to greater cooperation, which binds them together, deepens interdependence and fosters the sense of class belonging. Hence, this layer of prosocial behaviour contributes to strengthening the elements of social ties, interactions, communications and cooperation, shared interests, mutual support and joint actions.

It is important to note that prosocial behaviour can stem from various motivations, such as inherent altruistic preferences (Batson 1991), reciprocity and fairness (Fehr and Gächter 2000), and societal norms that value prosocial behaviour (Knafo, Schwartz, and Levine 2009; Levine, Ara Norenzayan, and Philbrick 2001). These different theories could influence the nature of the association between prosocial behaviour and working-class solidarity. For instance, if altruistic preferences drive prosocial behaviour, the relationship could be interpreted as going from prosocial behaviour to working-class solidarity. In contrast, if reciprocity and fairness are the driving forces, it could be argued that solidarity creates the necessary conditions for individuals to act prosocially. While our study did not aim to completely disentangle these different theories, we believe that acknowledging various motivations behind prosocial behaviour could enrich future discussions and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the link between prosocial behaviour and working-class solidarity.

Implications and conclusion

This study helps to revive the class analysis regarding the issue of solidarity which has long been neglected in sociological studies (Pun 2022). Our research findings present significant implications for further understanding of working-class solidarity, challenging the post-structural or postmodern postulation of 'the end of working-class'. This is the first attempt that bridges the social psychological concept of prosocial behaviour with the key sociological issue of solidarity concerning the human agency of working-class youth. After the rapid expansion of vocational education in post-reform China, about 50% of the country's youth receive vocational education (Koo 2016). The time and space provided by vocational schooling enables working-class students to form networks and build solidarity. Vocational schools can provide fertile soil for the nurturing of China's future working-class, where the underaged members learn, live and work together. Our study observed the bonding among vocational students who come from less well-off families and whose parents receive lower education. Despite their rural origin, these students often demonstrate higher levels of prosocial behaviour in daily helping, school volunteering, and school society activities. The social context mediating their tendency of prosociality is their part-time and off-school work experience that serves as a 'real school' of learning (Kulz 2017). We discovered that the lower their socio-economic status, the more pressure they have to take up casual jobs and face market challenges and labour disputes. Thus, there is a stronger tendency for them to build social connection and mutual support among themselves as the survival strategies of working life, which serves a solid micro-foundation to formulate an alternative logic of social values at the everyday practices that directly confronts the logic of exchange value (Lu, Koo, and Pun 2019; Skeggs 2014).

As Yao, Ruan, and Lai (2013, 357) rightly put it, the lack of formal labour market mechanisms in China 'continues to create both a strong need for and opportunities for economic actions to be organised around informal channels via social relations'. After taking up part-time jobs in a socially-

connected workplace, vocational students often share information among peers and facilitate collective actions at times of crisis or labour disputes. Furthermore, shared interests, common values, and willingness to support those in need among working-class students demonstrate a positive correlation between work experience, prosocial behaviour and working-class solidarity. This article hence challenges the recent debates on 'precariat class', which have largely precluded discussion on working-class solidarity. In contrast to the wide presumption that work experience would have a negative impact on solidarity, our study demonstrates that it can actually yield positive outcomes to prosocial behaviour and foster class-based solidarity. This article thus challenges the negative view on the solidarity of working-class youth by discovering a micro-foundation of solidarity and its validity in everyday practices. We demonstrate that solidarity can emerge through a multiplicity of prosocial behaviours exhibited by working-class youth. Our findings call for further longitudinal studies that could establish a more robust causal relationship between prosocial behaviour and working-class solidarity among working-class youth during their school life, the school-to-work transition, and even their union membership and involvement through their employment trajectories.

Notes

1. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis (i.e., the Cattell's Scree Test and parallel analysis) for the two samples from Guizhou and Lanzhou separately. Both samples demonstrated a one-factor model for the 10 items of WCSM. Thus, data from these two samples were combined.
2. The model also fitted the data well without confounding variables, $\chi^2(117) = 1164.85$, $p < .001$, CFI = .95, SRMR = .08, RMSEA = .06, and all paths in our proposed model remained significant.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Prof. Ngai Pun is a Chair Professor in the Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University. She was honored as the winner of the C. Wright Mills Award for her first book *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (2005), which has been translated into French and Chinese. Her co-authored book, *Dying for iPhone: Foxconn and the Lives of Chinese Workers* (2020) has also been translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, Polish and Chinese. She is the sole author of *Migrant Labor in China: Post Socialist Transformation* (2016, Polity Press), editor of seven book volumes in Chinese and English. She has published widely in leading international journals such as *positions*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Dialectical Anthropology*, *Mobilities*, *Sociology*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Sociological Review*, *Work, Employment and Society*, *Modern China*, *China Quarterly* and *China Journal*, etc.

Dr. Bryant P. H. Hui is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Dr. Hui's research interests center on the nature of individual behaviors and psychological differences (e.g., prosocial behaviors and online behaviors), natural environments (e.g., biodiversity), and social and cultural changes (e.g., privatization, migration, and globalization) that shape human well-being. He was awarded the prestigious Rising Star recognition from the Association for Psychological Science in 2023. His research has been published in top psychology journals (e.g., *Psychological Bulletin*, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Psychological Science*, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *Journal of Positive Psychology*, and *Psychosocial Intervention*), as well as non-psychology journals (e.g., *Youth and Society*, *Chinese Sociological Review*, *BMJ*, and *PLOS ONE*).

Prof. Anita Koo is a Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Hong Kong Baptist University. She researches on the structure of social stratification and its impact on the educational opportunities, youth development in transitions, and chances of social mobility among individuals from different classes and gender. Her present research focuses on the educational experiences, gendering process, life chances and the school-to-work transitions among those who study in vocational/professional programs in expanded higher education systems in Hong Kong and China. Her publications appeared in *Sociology*, *Journal of Education Policy*, *Sociological Review*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Journal of Youth Studies*, *Chinese Sociological Review*, etc.

ORCID

Ngai Pun  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5725-6988>
 Bryant P. H. Hui  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3063-9297>
 Anita Koo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2944-8928>

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