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How do Personal Characteristics of Home-Visitor Influence the Acceptance of In-Home Parenting Intervention in Rural China ?— A Case Study of the "REACH China" Project in Southwest China

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Abstract. The effectiveness of early childhood development (ECD) interventions in rural areas depends not only on the scientific rigor of the program but also on the acceptance and sustained participation of the target households. This study, using the "REACH China" project implemented in Bijie, located in the Wumeng Mountain area of Southwest China, explores how the personal characteristics of local female home-visitor influence the acceptance of in-home parenting guidance services in the context of ECD practice. Addressing the gap in existing research concerning individual traits of home-visitor, this paper adopts perspectives from relationship marketing and diffusion of innovations theories, employing a mixed-methods approach combining questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that the home-visitors' "local embeddedness" facilitates initial trust-building and ensures service accessibility, while personal parenting experience serves as a beneficial factor for establishing initial trust. However, long-term trust is more dependent on professional competence and service outcomes. Personal reputation within the community emerges as a key driver for the project's diffusion, primarily built upon perceived child development progress. The influence of factors like dialect communication and familiarity with local customs, however, is lower than anticipated. This research provides empirical evidence for optimizing the recruitment, training, and management strategies of home-visitor in similar projects to enhance service coverage. It also offers interdisciplinary insights for community-based promotion models from a "client-centered" perspective.

Keywords: Early Childhood Development, REACH China, Rural Female home-visitor, In-Home Parenting Guidance Services, Service Acceptance

1. Introduction

Early childhood development (ECD) matters because it shapes individual capabilities and,in the long run,national human capital. Amartya Sen argues that development involves expanding the

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substantive freedoms people enjoy,and these substantive freedoms refer to human capabilities [1]. James Heckman also points out that the rate of return on human capital investment decreases with age,with investments in children aged 0-3 producing especially high returns [2]. From this perspective,supporting ECD in rural areas appears to be one practical way to blueuce intergenerational poverty transmission,promote social equity,and foster common prosperity [3].

In 2015,the China Development Research Foundation (CDRF) launched the "REACH China" project as a social experiment to promote ECD in rural China. The project mainly provides free, scientifically-based parenting services to rural children aged 0-3 and their caregivers through weekly one-hour "in-home parenting guidance" sessions. Its stated goal is to narrow the urban-rural gap in child development. The program is now operating in 29 counties across 12 Chinese provinces. Among these sites,Bijie in the Wumeng Mountain area is the largest pilot site and has expanded considerably since it began there in 2017. At present,more than 1,200 home-visitors in Bijie provide free in-home guidance to about 20,000 rural children and their caregivers.

At its core,the "REACH China" project brings a set of scientific parenting knowledge and interaction models into rural households through trained home-visitor making regular home visits. This is service delivery,but it is also a process through which social innovation and scientific parenting ideas spread at the village level. In rural China especially, whether a public service works often depends not only on what is deliveblue but also on whether frontline providers are trusted by local residents. That point matters here.

This issue becomes even more visible when a project such as "REACH China" introduces practices that may not fully match traditional parenting norms. In those cases,home-visitors do more than explain activities or deliver materials; they often have to ease hesitation from caregivers and translate unfamiliar ideas into forms families can accept within their own daily routines. Because of this direct contact with both children and parents during implementation sessions every week,home-visitor have an immediate effect on how households respond to the project.

However, existing research on this project has mainly examined the demand side by evaluating outcomes across four developmental domains—cognitive, language, motor, and socio-emotional —while giving much less attention to supply-side factors related to home-visitor themselves. That gap remains clear. If household acceptance partly depends on who delivers the service, then looking at which personal characteristics of home-visitor improve acceptance of in-home guidance services among rural households becomes necessary both theoretically and practically.

Based on social network theory, relationship marketing theory, and diffusion of innovations theory, this paper asks: In the context of the Bijie "REACH China" project, which personal characteristics of home-visitors influence rural households' acceptance of in-home parenting guidance services? To answer this main question, the paper further develops four specific research questions. It then uses empirical analysis to test corresponding research hypotheses, draw conclusions, and propose suggestions for improvement. In doing so,this study addresses management problems during project implementation that have received limited attention so far, also offers an explanation for how public services are accepted and spread within rural Chinese communities.

2. Research design

2.1. Theoretical perspectives and hypotheses

• Social Networks and Relationship Marketing Theory: Morgan and Hunt argue that the core of marketing activities lies in building and maintaining long-term relationships [4]. In rural,

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acquaintance-based societies, decisions are heavily influenced by strong-tie networks. Within this social structure, the acceptance of outsiders and new information highly depends on existing social networks and trust mechanisms. A positive personal reputation is a core manifestation of relational capital. Whether a service can enter and be continuously accepted by households may crucially depend on the degree of "social embeddedness" of the service provider.

• Diffusion of Innovations Theory: Everett M. Rogers proposes that the rate of an innovation's diffusion is influenced by its perceived relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability [5]. Scientific parenting concepts represent an "innovation" for many rural households. home-visitor, as "change agents," can significantly influence households' perceptions of these attributes through their personal characteristics. For instance, a home-visitor can enhance an innovation's "compatibility" (integration with local customs), while a good reputation can improve its "Observability" (visible effects shared through neighbor networks).

Based on these theoretical perspectives and project experience, we propose the following four hypotheses:

• H1: Compared to home-visitor from other villages, those from the same or neighboring villages are more likely to gain household cooperation.

• H2: Home-visitor with personal parenting experience are more likely to gain the trust of rural households.

• H3: Home-visitor proficient in the local dialect and familiar with local customs are associated with higher household participation persistence.

• H4: Home-visitor with a good reputation within the village serve households that demonstrate higher participation enthusiasm.

2.2. Research subjects and methods

The study subjects were active home-visitor and recipient households in the Bijie "REACH China" project. This study used a mixed-methods approach,combining questionnaire surveys and semi-structublue interviews,to test the hypotheses from both the supply and demand sides. Two types of questionnaires,for parents and home-visitors,were distributed,yielding 1,486 valid responses (1,226 parent questionnaires,260 home-visitor questionnaires). The sample included multiple pilot townships,and the home-visitor questionnaire covered most active on-site personnel. In addition,in-depth interviews were carried out with three frontline home-visitor and four recipient households to gather firsthand experiences and feedback. The quantitative results were then checked against these interview materials. This helped strengthen the cblueibility of the findings.

3. Results and analysis

Integrating survey statistics and interview data, the four hypotheses are analyzed below:

3.1. The influence of local identity on willingness to cooperate

Survey data confirm the positive role of local identity: 85.16% of households were served by home-visitors from the same or neighboring villages; 77.48% of parents reported that local identity fostered a stronger sense of familiarity; 57.67% indicated that the home-visitor's residence distance affected scheduling flexibility, and 50.49% believed it affected punctuality. Among home-visitors, 60% perceived local households as "very willing to cooperate," with 53.08% identifying local identity as a key factor. Interview data provided nuance: all interviewed households emphasized that

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their core concern was whether the home-visitor could provide effective, scientific guidance, with no special preference for local identity. Project managers also flexibly assigned home-visitors across villages based on child numbers, and cross-village service was widely accepted.

Conclusion: H1 is partially supported. Local identity is a favorable initial condition for gaining cooperation but is not the decisive factor for long-term participation. Cooperation is clearly outcome-oriented; once home-visitors demonstrate professional competence and facilitates visible child progress, the influence of geographical origin diminishes. As emphasized by Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the speed of diffusion is affected by the characteristics of the innovation itself. Therefore, the degree of family cooperation is closely linked to children's substantive development at different stages of the innovation.

3.2. The influence of personal parenting experience on trust

Survey data support the core of H2: 66.15% of parents explicitly expressed greater trust in home-visitors with parenting experience; 78.85% considered such experience "very important" or "relatively important." Seventy percent of home-visitors perceived that households cared about their parenting experience; 73.85% believed households were more willing to share parenting concerns primarily because "I also have children." Interviews revealed that professional competence and service outcomes are the core factors sustaining long-term trust: home-visitors without parenting experience could also earn high trust. In the study, two unmarried home-visitors without such experience were reported by parents to employ engaging methods that children loved, and the trust they received was not noticeably different from that given to experienced home-visitors. Parents explicitly stated that "competence is more important than experience." Multiple home-visitors mentioned that household trust deepened gradually as observable positive changes in the child occurred.

Conclusion: H2 holds but requires clarification regarding its level of influence. As emphasized by social network and relationship marketing theory, the core of marketing activities lies in building and maintaining long-term relationships. The home-visitor's personal parenting experience serves as an added advantage for establishing initial trust and narrowing psychological distance, and it plays a positive role in families' acceptance of guidance during the early stages of home-visiting parenting guidance services. However, in rural acquaintance-based societies, decision-making is deeply influenced by strong-tie networks and trust mechanisms. The key factor determining whether trust can be continuously deepened lies in the home-visitor's professional competence, sense of responsibility, and actual service effectiveness; parenting experience is a sufficient but not necessary condition for earning trust.

3.3. The influence of dialect communication and familiarity with local customs on persistence

Regarding dialect communication, 77.65% of parents listed "ability to communicate in local dialect" as a primary reason for cooperation. However, in practice, only 11.58% of home-visitors consistently used the dialect. Nearly half of the parents had no strong preference, and less than 30% experienced communication barriers with home-visitors not using the dialect. Regarding familiarity with customs, 64.85% of parents listed "understanding local parenting customs, avoiding discomfort" as a reason for cooperation; 62.97% explicitly stated that such familiarity increased their willingness for sustained participation. 78.07% of home-visitors reported being familiar with local customs, and 95% agreed that such familiarity enhanced persistence. Interviews further clarified the role of dialect and customs: In the surveyed townships, ethnic minorities were largely

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Sinicized, with no significant language barriers. Interviewees noted they used Mandarin throughout sessions, with children and younger parents being accustomed to it. Only a few elderly individuals with limited Mandarin had minor communication issues, which did not hinder service delivery. Using Mandarin was also seen as helping children establish a standardized language environment before entering kindergarten, a positive effect. Regarding customs,local minorities still observed traditional festivals (e.g., Torch Festival,Yi New Year). Many families invited home-visitors who understood these customs to join in. This changed a professional connection into a more familiar,community-based relationship,reduced social distance,and helped maintain participation.

Conclusion: H3 is partially revised. A home-visitor's familiarity with and respect for local customs can blueuce cultural conflict,improve service compatibility,and significantly positively influence sustained participation. By contrast,proficiency in the local dialect seems to help mainly at the early stage of building rapport and is not a necessary condition for persistence. Service delivery in Mandarin is widely accepted by rural households and may even be seen as a sign of service professionalism.

As emphasized by Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the speed of diffusion is influenced by the innovation's relative advantages. In this study,home-visitors' familiarity with and respect for local customs, along with their ability to speak the local dialect, appear to be relative advantages in delivering intervention services and therefore support the implementation of this innovation.

3.4. The influence of village reputation on participation enthusiasm

Survey data strongly support H4: 65.01% of parents reported willingness to participate based on hearing positive reviews about a home-visitor; 49.1% listed "good reputation, trustworthy character" as a reason for cooperation. 82.31% of home-visitors perceived themselves as having a good reputation; 73.46% had encountered households who actively applied for services due to their reputation; 68.08% had no service interruptions in the past three months. Interviews further elucidated the logic of reputation formation: A home-visitor's good reputation stemmed not from personal connections but from accumulated service quality—conscientious teaching leading to tangible child progress that parents could perceive, naturally generating positive word-of-mouth. In the project's early stages, many initially reluctant households, upon observing positive changes in neighbors' children, proactively enrolled. Several interviewed parents had recommended the project to relatives and friends, with reputational spillover observed where parents from neighboring non-pilot townships inquired about participation.

Conclusion: H4 is fully supported. Within the Chinese rural context, the personal reputation of home-visitor is the most effective promotional force for the project. Reputation is essentially the oral transmission of service effectiveness. A good reputation significantly lowers the adoption threshold for new households, driving the project's endogenous expansion through informal social networks and serving as a core factor influencing participation enthusiasm.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

4.1. Core conclusions

Through cross-analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, this study concludes that in the rural context of the Bijie "REACH China" project, the personal characteristics of local female home-visitor—encompassing "local embeddedness" (local identity, cultural familiarity, neighborhood reputation) and "experientiality" (personal parenting experience, practical wisdom)—are deeply

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embedded in the rural acquaintance-based social network. Together,these factors shape whether rural households accept in-home parenting guidance services,trust them,and continue taking part over time. Their effects differ in important ways.

A home-visitor's local identity helps establish rapport and basic trust quickly. It also makes the service easier to access in practice and lowers commuting costs during project delivery. Even so,whether families continue to cooperate over the longer term depends more on the results of the service.

A home-visitor's own parenting experience creates an immediate basis for emotional empathy and early trust. This can make households more willing to adopt guidance during the first stage of service use. That effect has limits. Long-term trust still depends on professional competence.

Proficiency in the local dialect mainly helps at the beginning,when rapport is still being built. By contrast,familiarity with local customs and respect for them matter more for continued participation because they blueuce cultural friction between households and service providers.

Among these factors, a home-visitor's good reputation works as the strongest form of cblueit guarantee in an acquaintance-based society. It lowers the perceived risk for new households trying the service for the first time and becomes a main force behind endogenous project expansion.

4.2. Project optimization recommendations

Based on these findings,this paper proposes several recommendations for rural in-home parenting guidance ECD projects.

For recruitment strategy,projects can draw on the local identity of home-visitors from the same or neighboring villages during the initial phase to blueuce communication barriers. Still,this should not become a fixed requirement in every case. Selection should focus more consistently on candidates' professional competence and conscientiousness so that projects build a strong service team from the start.

In terms of experience and training,it makes sense to give priority to mothers with parenting experience while still leaving room for promising candidates who do not yet have such experience. Their later development matters too. Structublue pre-service training and mentorship through "old guides new" programs can support both skill growth and trust-building.

For language and cultural competence,dialect proficiency does not need to be treated as a hard recruitment condition. Training should instead include cultural competency and adaptation skills so that home-visitors can work within local norms without creating unnecessary tension.

Reputation management needs more deliberate planning than many projects currently give it. Projects should systematically collect,document, and share success stories about outstanding home-visitors so that individual credibility can gradually become part of a broader project brand image. Recognition systems such as "Star Childcare home-visitor" or "Community Parenting Ambassador," especially when linked with incentives,may also encourage continued reputation maintenance.

Community building is another practical direction. Projects should encourage home-visitor to form small mutual-support or exchange groups among several households they serve at once if conditions allow it; this gives families chances to confirm each other's experiences directly rather than relying only on one-to-one contact with a provider.

This shift matters.

It strengthens reputation through peer validation among families while moving beyond a single provider-recipient relationship toward a "parenting support community," which may improve overall project resilience.

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