

A Discussion on The Dilemma of The Professionalisation of Social Work in Contemporary Mainland China - Neither does Social work own independent nor professional system of knowledge

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Abstract

Intrinsic reason why the professionalisation of social work in mainland China has been falling into the dilemma of brain drain, theoretical heterogeneity and dysfunction was analysed - there is no independent and professional system of knowledge. First of all, brain drain, theoretical heterogeneity and dysfunction indicated the necessity of the professionalisation of social work. Then, the fact that talents with higher quality are more likely to leave the field of social work was discussed based on the previous statistical analysis. Subsequently, it was argued that the theory and practice of social work actually belong to sociology, political science and psychology from the perspectives of macro-, mezzo- and micro- social work. Moreover, the ethics and values of social work are difficult to be completely deferred with the strict restriction of mainland Chinese authorities to folk organizations, which was considered as being caused by the non-professionalism and heterogeneity of cognitive system of social work. Eventually, three outcomes for the professionalisation of social work in mainland China were inferred: social work as a professional field were marginalized; social work as a discipline were merged into sociology, politics and psychology; social workers would become interdisciplinary coordinators.

Keywords

Social work, specialisation, brain drain, theoretical heterogeneity and social dysfunction.

1. The context of the specialisation of social work

1.1. Introduction

Social work does not be professional as a professional field. Therefore, a host of proponents of social work attempted to improve the professionalism of social work through specialisation. Some authors in mainland China have proposed measures, such as increasing salaries, introducing high-quality supervisors, and strengthening organizational management. However, the fundamental problem that social work is unprofessional has never been reversed. This industry in mainland China is still facing with the dilemma of brain drain, theoretical heterogeneity and dysfunction.

Crucial questions are as follows in such a context:

Why is social work in contemporary mainland China generally stuck into an impasse of brain drain, theoretical heterogeneity or dysfunction?

How will this deadlock able to be shattered?

1.2. The retrospection of literatures

Above of all, the professionalisation of social work has been discussed from diverse perspectives in mainland China. Predecessors have utilised various professional theories and methods to describe and explain essence, hallmark, path and related relationship of the professionalisation and specialisation of social work. Yet, the limitations of the cognitive system of social work have been understated from the perspective of pure practitioners.

1.2.1. An overview of relevant discussions on history

Discussions on the professionalisation of social work could be divided into traditional arguments from the 18th to the 20th century and contemporary seminars since the 21st century. Traditional discussions mainly revolve around the question of whether social work is an independent profession or not, while contemporary discussions focus on how the professionalism of social work is able to be improved.

Traditional discussions include three significant "milestones" which are recorded in "Is Social Work A Profession?" that is an article by Abraham Flexner and published in 1915, Social Diagnosis (« Diagnostic Social » in French; « Diagnóstico Social » in Spanish) that is a monograph by Mary Ellen Richmond and published in 1917 Anno Domini, and Attributes of A Profession¹ that is an article by Ernest Greenwood and published in 1957 Anno Domini. Flexner insisted that social work was not an independent profession because social work did not possess entire individual responsibility or intellectual attribute; Richmond systematically expounded various methods of social work in Social diagnosis, which provided professional theoretical guidance for social workers; Greenwood argued that social work is an independent profession because social work in the United States already has attributes of a profession. These attributes are: firstly, there is a set of systematic theoretical systems to support its activities; secondly, it has been recognized by society; thirdly, this activity has professional authority; fourthly, there is ethical specification within the profession; and fifthly, this professional community has formed unique culture.

People have also been starting discussions on the professionalisation of social work in mainland China. In general, predecessors have carried out various theoretical and practical arguments based on the dilemma of brain drain, dysfunction and improper management. Details are as follows:

Principal analytical perspectives

For one thing, some essays reflect the paradigm of sociology: analysing social phenomena, social products and social problems rely on holistic and relatively abstract positivist methodology. Quantitative analysis, comprehensive judgement and deduction are perspective characteristics of these articles. For other hand, lots people use exploratory method on field to delve into a certain field of social work and to discover individual trait. They explore cultural factors during the specialisation of social work through anthropological perspective and humanistic methodology. At first, some persons analysed the essence, necessity and feasibility of the specialisation of social work in contemporary mainland China from the perspectives of culture, social norm, and social interaction. For example: it was found that social-value, social-ability and personal-ability values have a significant impact on the sustainable development of social workers via logistic regression analysis. Secondly, Statistical data at a certain city showed that the policies on social work implemented by the government generally do not meet the proposition of residents. Thirdly, It was exposed via a survey that community workers at a certain county were merely engaged in community work transiently thus they lack of practical experience. Moreover, It suggests on a survey of social workers at a certain city that low income of social workers is still a critical factor restraining the sustainable development of social work. Additionally, people have explored the role at corporate social work, correctional social work, social work for adolescents, social work at communities and other specific areas regarding the professionalisation of social work through participatory observation in contemporary mainland China. The discussions involved political concepts, cultural

1 GREENWOOD, E. (1957). Attributes of a Profession [J]. Social Work, 2(3): 45–55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23707630>

discrepancies between the orient and the west, altruism (altruisme in French; Altruismus in German) and other cultural factors.

Bulk of these articles involve viewpoints from political perspective. A large number of authors explore how social worker directly or indirectly participates in national governance, the governance to communities, policy advocacy, and regime maintenance. These articles are characterized by qualitative analysis, analytical judgement and conduction. These discussants generally talked about the political system that promotes the specialisation and professionalisation of social work at a macro level. For an instance, suggestions were putted forward with a reference on American, Japanese and Singaporean experience on the aspect of the methods for managing communities and the management of communal talents. These suggestions are respectively: the government was advised separate from social work; increase revenue and reduce expenditure; improve the incentive mechanism; and reform the access system. Some suggestions - including the incentive to talents, atmospheric rendering, professional training, the establishment of supervised system and the enhancement of responsibility awareness - were putted forward posterior identifying shortcomings of the supervision of social work in contemporary mainland China. There was an opinion that highlights three segments for promoting the professionalisation of social work in a territory on border of mainland China. Reachable breakthrough: the assistance from favorable talents of social work; substantial exploration: governmental purchase to the service of social work; the constitution of completeness: to build professional brand of services. Fundamental strategy for promoting the professionalisation of social work in mainland China was deduced from the essence of professionalisation of social work: institutional construction.

Among a small number of articles, authors explored the nourishment of talents on the aspect of elderly care and social work based rest on the theory and method of managing human resource in economics. First and foremost, the mathematical model of explanatory structure was cited to calculate the structure of factors affecting the professionalisation of ageing care services at a community with the guidance of theory on human capital: lower influential factors are laws and regulations, organizational norms of ageing care, incentive mechanisms and the structure of talents; intermediate influential factors are salary, professional training, professional identity and the development of careers; upper influential factors are professional quality, personal characteristics and the desirability of workplace Besides, principal component analysis and rotary factor analysis were adopted to figure out the current status of professionalisation of domestic caregivers at Shanghai of mainland China: palpably tremendous divergence in professional ethics; inadequate theoretical professionalism and insufficient professional training; dismal development of careers; restrictive autonomy... Last but not least, it was inferred with the guidance of double-factor theory and the theory of equity that monotonous remuneration of labour might alleviate dissatisfaction of social workers merely, thus it was proposed to motivate social workers through multiple welfare of careers.

Common conclusions

Some common conclusions could be drawn from them in spite of these discussions are various in content and form. At the macro sense, predecessors generally advocated the construction of systems that are conducive to the professionalisation of social work. At the mezzo sense, all of them suggested should improve the management of institutions and specification of social work. In the micro sense, they consented that the professionalism of social workers could be enhanced via developing professional education of social work including professional training of social work.

1.2.2. The review of literatures

Basic reason why social work owns no independent or professional system of knowledge has not been paid attention to nevertheless predecessors have made suggestions on institutional construction, organizational management and professional education of social work in mainland China. Especially, there are three flaws in the previous discussions. They are respectively Sole-reformist stance, Excessive perspective and Non-demand orientation.

Sole-reformist stance

The essays at 0 Principal analytical perspectives are based on the fundamental assumption commonly that social work is an independent and professional realm. Sole would everybody resort to improving the superstructure (Überbau in German; superstructure in French) in order to propel the professionalisation of social work in mainland China when the foundation of social work has not been doubted. Sole-reformist standpoint is not conducive to a comprehensive analysis of the social foundation and cognitive system of social work in contemporary mainland China.

Excessive perspective of humanistic analysis

Humanistic paradigm had been abused to analyse problems in 0 Principal analytical perspectives, which led to high information entropy (entropie de l'information in French; Informationsentropie in German) midst regional comparisons. Mathematically logic derivation was ignored entirely even if some articles did involve deduction based on rationalism. Not only do general principles look unreliable, but individual instantiation would be innumerable, as a result.

Non-demand orientation

Majority of essays were problem-oriented instead of demand-oriented in 0 Principal analytical perspectives. Predecessors tended to point out the institutional, organizational, educational and ethical dilemmas of social work, but did not contemplate the phenomenon that services provided by social workers with insufficient cognitive abilities cannot gratify intricate needs of those recipients. Social workers would be able to demonstrate their professionalism only if they were capable of satisfying complex demand.

2. Contradictions of the professionalisation of social work

As what could be viewed at 1.1 Introduction, social work in contemporary mainland China encounters three contradictions during its professionalisation. They are respectively the paradox of brain drain, the problem of theoretical heterogeneity, and the dysfunction of social functionality. First of all, dependency and non-professionalism of the system of knowledge of social work restrict the development of high-quality talents, accordingly brain drain was brought about. Moreover, the cognitive system and practice of social work belongs to politics and sociology in macro- and mezzo- fields, whereas it is reliant on psychology in the micro-field. Eventually, organizations of social work have perished agents of social governance under the rigorous control of authorities in mainland China, which restricts social workers from pursuing altruism autonomously.

2.1. Professional education exacerbates brain drain

Social work professional education has been expected to cultivate high-quality talents for social work. Ironically, the more competent talents are, the more likely they are to leave the realm of social work. Now that simple cognitive system of social work originates from sociology, politics, psychology and so on disciplines, we could infer the reason why professional education deteriorates the outflow of human resource: the dependency and non-professionalism of the system of knowledge of social work constrain the development of prominent talents. Developmental opportunity of social workers is vulnerable to be snatched away in a scrambling for value, because such an industry owning insufficient cognitive abilities could be displaced easily. Therefore, those who have relatively higher competency are inclined to divert to promising industries for more resources.

2.2. Innovate theories based on theoretical heterogeneity

Interdisciplinary social work is affiliated with politics, sociology, psychology and so on disciplines. Meanwhile, social work that emphasizes practice does not possess the circumstance to create macro theories, while upper discipline must have unique macro theories. It is apparent that theoretical heterogeneity of social work has already occurred when cognitive basis of social work had been established. In mainland China, macro social work involves social aid, judicial social work, social welfare and so on fields; mezzo social work is mainly concentrated within social work at communities; micro social work is mainly reflected in psychological counselling, resource linkage and advocacy on casework

and teamwork. Macro and mezzo social work usually vests to the practice of politics and sociology, while micro social work coincides with the work of psychiatrists considerably despite social workers may do it more considerably.

According to 1.2.2 The review of literatures above, it is visible that Excessive perspective of humanistic analysis resulted in theoretical innovation of social work often bogs into perpetually special instances. Such an innovation based on theoretical heterogeneity is to accumulate specific experience for the parental disciplines essentially, instead of to form independent or professional system of knowledge.

2.3. Ethical dilemma causes dysfunction

Organizations of social work have to carry out their work in accordance with the requirements of the government and the ruling party. Civil social organizations, including organizations of social work, are regulated strictly in contemporary mainland China. This regulation is mainly reflected in a fact that the government and the ruling party control most of the resources available to organizations of social work. Social workers will be able to reasonably play the role as an agent of social governance when a requirement of authorities is consistent with ethical specification of social work; Ethical dilemma would cause the dysfunction of social work once a requirement of administrative premiers has conflicted with the ethical principles. It could be attributed to the inability that social workers obey both of requirement of authorities and ethical specification of social work simultaneously.

A fact that superficial system of knowledge of social work is highly dependent on politics and sociology is the inherent reason why institutions of social work depend on the government and the ruling party. They will have a chance to develop independently and to autonomously pursue altruism furthermore probably if social work owns a system of knowledge that surpasses politics and sociology. It is similar with the separation of the realm of artificial intelligence from traditional engineering of computers.

3. The future of the professionalisation of social work

To summarize the discussion at Contradictions of the professionalisation of social work, internal reason why social work in contemporary mainland China has been falling into brain drain, theoretical heterogeneity and dysfunction during the professionalisation is analysed as the lack of an independent and professional system of knowledge. We shall boldly predict three results of professionalisation of social work - pessimistic, neutral and optimistic outcomes, and briefly explore the feasibility of optimistic result subsequently.

3.1. Three outcomes of the professionalisation of social work

3.1.1. Pessimistic marginalization

Pessimistically perceiving, it will be difficult to reverse the fate of being marginalized along with professionalized progression if social work as a professional realm proceeds in relying on politics, sociology and psychology. It will be reflected not only in successive atrophy on the scale of professional education², but also on the lost of autonomy of social workers. Major social work will disappear from the list of majors at bulk universities perhaps.

3.1.2. Neutral merger of subjects

A neutral way out for social work is to be merged into the corresponding parental disciplines. Macro and mezzo social work shall be merged into politics and sociology, whereas micro social work shall be merged into psychology. The end will be the researching direction, elective and column for propaganda of social work at communities, mental health and legal aid will be embedded into realms of public administration and psychology respectively.

² Suga, Takamasa. Who ought to be blamed for the suspension of admission of undergraduate social work at Sun Yat-sen University? [N]. Pekin: The Charity Times. May 16, 2017. <http://www.gongyishibao.com/html/yaowen/11739.html>

3.1.3. Optimistic interdisciplinary coordination

Optimistically conjecturing, social workers are expected to become interdisciplinary coordinators if social work can organically absorb knowledge from other disciplines, such as: mathematics, physics, and information technology, guided by social demand. Social workers will be able to establish close interaction amid government, resident, technological developer, volunteer, and so on entities. Exemplifying, interdisciplinary coordinators are not only able to assist technical developers in going through with the task of training artificial intelligence so that artificial intelligence are enabled to satisfy diverse need of residents, but also promote mutual comprehension among various entities in social service.

3.2. Feasibility of interdisciplinary coordination

By out-looking on the coordination between social work and artificial intelligence, it could be inferred that representation learning (apprentissage par représentation in French; Repräsentationslernen in German), deep learning (apprentissage profond in French; tiefes Lernen in German) and reinforcement learning (apprentissage par renforcement in French; bestärkendes Lernen in German) assisted by social workers will help technicians train artificial intelligence to serve residents. Moral, psychological and nursing guidance provided by social workers to machines will be efficient if social work organically absorbs knowledge from other disciplines.

3.2.1. Representation learning facilitated by social workers

First of all, social workers could utilise their high sensitivity to morality and familiarity to local residents to assist engineers in building a decision tree to instruct artificial intelligence to learn the characteristics of local residents. These features will be used to infer a certain state and an action to be taken. An instance of artificial intelligence relying on a decision tree to judge the risk that residents may come down with cardiac illness is shown in Figure 1.

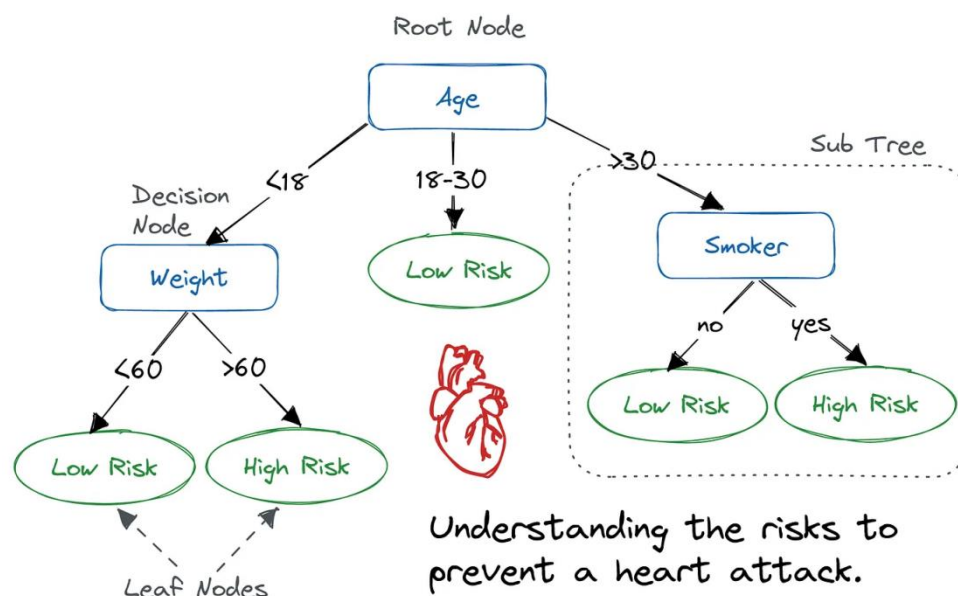


Figure 1. Example of using a decision tree to determine the risk of heart disease

Source: Mishra, Shruti. Interpretable AI: Decision Trees [EB/OL]. Medium blog, July the 12 nd , 2023.

<https://medium.com/@shrutimisra/interpretable-ai-decision-trees-f9698e94ef9b>

In this instance, what a social worker will be liable to do is to accurately input health information of residents into the decision tree to facilitate AI to accomplish representation learning.

3.2.2. Deep learning facilitated by social workers

In addition, social workers could offer technological crew with data about local community as input for the multi-layer perceptron through social survey. The inputted values will be applied to iterative operations in order to compute outputted values or weights without a specific conditional structure, as shown in formula (1).

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \begin{pmatrix} w_{1,1}^T & w_{1,2}^T & \cdots & w_{1,n}^T \\ w_{2,1}^T & w_{2,2}^T & \cdots & w_{2,n}^T \\ \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ w_{m,1}^T & w_{m,2}^T & \cdots & w_{m,n}^T \end{pmatrix}^{[1]} \cdot \begin{pmatrix} x_{1,1} \\ x_{2,1} \\ \vdots \\ x_{m,1} \end{pmatrix} + \begin{pmatrix} b_{1,1} \\ b_{2,1} \\ \vdots \\ b_{m,1} \end{pmatrix}^{[1]} = \begin{pmatrix} a_{1,1} \\ a_{2,1} \\ \vdots \\ a_{m,1} \end{pmatrix}^{[1]} \quad \forall s=1 \\
 & \begin{pmatrix} w_{1,1}^T & w_{1,2}^T & \cdots & w_{1,n}^T \\ w_{2,1}^T & w_{2,2}^T & \cdots & w_{2,n}^T \\ \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ w_{m,1}^T & w_{m,2}^T & \cdots & w_{m,n}^T \end{pmatrix}^{[2]} \cdot \begin{pmatrix} a_{1,1} \\ a_{2,1} \\ \vdots \\ a_{m,1} \end{pmatrix}^{[1]} + \begin{pmatrix} b_{1,1} \\ b_{2,1} \\ \vdots \\ b_{m,1} \end{pmatrix}^{[2]} = \begin{pmatrix} a_{1,1} \\ a_{2,1} \\ \vdots \\ a_{m,1} \end{pmatrix}^{[2]} \quad \forall s=2 \\
 & \vdots \\
 & \begin{pmatrix} w_{1,1}^T & w_{1,2}^T & \cdots & w_{1,n}^T \\ w_{2,1}^T & w_{2,2}^T & \cdots & w_{2,n}^T \\ \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ w_{m,1}^T & w_{m,2}^T & \cdots & w_{m,n}^T \end{pmatrix}^{[s_t]} \cdot \begin{pmatrix} a_{1,1} \\ a_{2,1} \\ \vdots \\ a_{m,1} \end{pmatrix}^{[s_t-1]} + \begin{pmatrix} b_{1,1} \\ b_{2,1} \\ \vdots \\ b_{m,1} \end{pmatrix}^{[s_t]} = \begin{pmatrix} y_{1,1} \\ y_{2,1} \\ \vdots \\ y_{m,1} \end{pmatrix} \quad \forall s=s_t
 \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

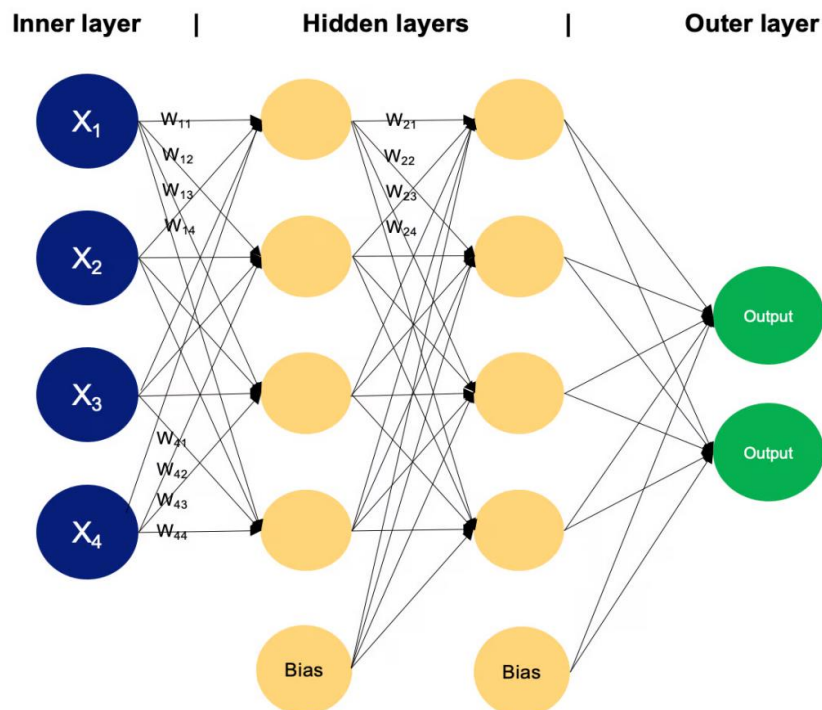


Figure 2. The basic structure of a multilayer perceptron

Source: Jaiswal, Sejal. Multilayer Perceptrons in Machine Learning: A Comprehensive Guide [EB/OL]. Datacamp, July the 28 th , 2024.

<https://www.datacamp.com/tutorial/multilayer-perceptrons-in-machine-learning>

For one hand, social workers can precisely evaluate the satisfaction of civilians with the services provided by artificial intelligence according to the demand-oriented principle and substitute scores into

the outputting layer of Figure 2. On the other hand, the magnitude of weights $w_{i,j}^{[s]}$ could be estimated by social worker and technical staff based on ethical criterion and actual demand. Finally, weights $w_{m \times n}^{[s]}$ and outputted values $y_{m \times 1}$ can be approximated by gradient descent.

3.2.3. Reinforcement learning facilitated by social workers

Subsequently, social workers could monitor the action of machines in real time to promote fine tuning (réglage fin in French; Feinabstimmung in German) of parameters. Discounting factor γ^{i-1} would be adjusted according to the moral, psychological and nursing guidances of social workers. Meantime, the strategy π of actions would also change to pursue the maximal reward. It is shown as formula (2).

$$\begin{aligned} Q^*(s, a) &= \max_{\pi} E[r_t + \gamma \cdot r_{t+1} + \gamma^2 \cdot r_{t+2} + \dots + \gamma^{t+m-1} \cdot r_{t+m} | s_t = s, a_t = a, \pi] \\ &= \max_{\pi} \left\{ \sum_{i=t}^{t+m} \gamma^{i-1} \cdot r_i | s_t = s, a_t = a, \pi \right\} \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

The above action-value function describes the maximal summation of rewards r_t discounted by γ at temporal step t . This maximal summation is achieved via the policy of behaviours after conducting observations s and taking actions a .³

4. Conclusion

Correlating to the argument above, the answer to the both crucial questions which were raised in 1.1 Introduction are as follows:

The underlying reason why social work in contemporary mainland China is generally stuck into an impasse of brain drain, theoretical heterogeneity and dysfunction is that social work owns no independent or professional system of knowledge.

This deadlock will be able to be shattered in three manners. They are respectively:

Social work as a professional realm will be marginalized;

Social work as a discipline will be merged into sociology, politics, and psychology;

Social workers will become interdisciplinary coordinators.

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³ Mnih, V.; Kavukcuoglu, K.; Silver, D. et al. Human-level control through deep reinforcement learning [J]. London, United Kingdom: Nature, 518: 529, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14236>

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