

Research on Sense of Social Responsibility in China: Looking Back and Looking Forward

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Abstract

Sense of social responsibility is one of the important qualities that modern citizens must have. Individuals' sense of social responsibility is related to the social production and economic construction of the country as well as the formation of good social orders. China has a long history of research on sense of social responsibility. This paper introduces research on sense of responsibility and the concept of sense of responsibility, the current situation of sense of social responsibility, the influential elements of sense of social responsibility and the cultivation of sense of social responsibility and so on, and it also look forward to domestic academic study of sense of social responsibility.

Key words: China; Sense of responsibility; Sense of social responsibility

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INTRODUCTION

Human beings are a product of socialization. When people get all kinds of rights and protection of their interests

in society, they also inevitably assume corresponding responsibilities, which reflect the unification of citizens' rights and responsibilities. In real life, we see repeated phenomenon in which there are only interests but no responsibilities. There are many vicious cases in which the subjects are in pursuit of personal fame and interests or neglect their duties and this causes significant harm to others, the society and even the international reputation of our country. Behind the popularity of utilitarianism, individualism and hedonism indicate citizens' extreme lack of sense of social responsibility. To enhance the education of citizens' sense of social responsibility has a significantly positive meaning for the maintenance of social production and economic development as well as the construction of good social orders. Chinese traditional culture emphasizes “understanding of ethics”, which reflects an individual's specific responsibilities in the ethical concept of relationship between “fathers and sons, the monarchs and the officials, husbands and wives, bothers, friends” and also requires individuals to assume responsibilities to others and to the group. The study of sense of social responsibility in China has a long history and has achieved some results. This paper introduces researches on sense of social responsibility in brief, looks forward to research on sense of social responsibility in the future and proposes the direction of further exploration on this subject.

1. SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY AND RESEARCHES ON THIS CONCEPT

The broader concept of sense of social responsibility is sense of responsibility. Researches on “sense of social responsibility” cannot be separated from the analysis of and discussion on the concept of “sense of responsibility”.

Sense of responsibility is usually defined as a positive attitude or emotional experience related to responsibility.

Some representative definitions in Chinese academic circle include the following: “Sense of responsibility refers to the attitude towards things and obligations that social members, as independent individuals, should do” (Liu, 2001), “sense of responsibility is experience of attitude” (Zhang, 1999), and “sense of responsibility is the positive and initiative experience of attitude towards one’s obligations and responsibilities” (Sun, 1996). Some scholars define sense of responsibility from the perspective of moral education and psychology, and these definitions are as follows:

from the perspective of moral education, sense of responsibility refers to an individual’s consciousness of the responsibility that he assumes in society and in the process of self-development and the emotional experience whether his moral tasks meet his moral needs in his moral activities; from a psychological perspective, sense of responsibility refers to an individual’s emotional experience produced by different attitudes regarding whether the action choice, process, and results meet his inner needs when he assumes the responsibility in human society and in his own development. (Duan, 2000)

In the *Dictionary of Psychology*, compiled by Professor Lin Chongde, “sense of responsibility” is defines as:

the emotional experience that is produced when individuals have a positive and responsible attitude while conducting moral tasks; it reflects the individual’s positive emotional experience and clear attribution of the tasks that he assumes, and it determines the extend of the completion of moral tasks and the degree of guilt the individual feels in the absence of completion of the tasks. (Lin, 2003)

From the above we can see that, sense of responsibility is an individual’s positive attitude orientation or emotional experience towards social provisions. This is recognized in the academic field. However, at the same time we have seen that many scholars believe this is not the complete connotations of sense of responsibility.

Sense of responsibility is a moral characteristic which combines cognition, emotion and attitude; it not only refers to the special moral emotions that people produce while faced with responsibility, but also includes the understanding of responsibility (responsible concept) and the corresponding actions (responsible attitude or actions). (Chen, 2004)

This definition takes the sense of responsibility as the unification of three elements of responsible cognition, responsible emotion and responsible action. The author believes that responsible cognition is the foundation of responsibility; responsible action is the practice of sense of responsibility; together with sense of responsibility, they constitute complete connotations of responsibility.

In the above definitions of sense of responsibility, the term “obligation” appears frequently. “Obligation” and “responsibility” are similar. Sense of obligation and sense of responsibility in moral context are related but different. Sense of obligation emphasizes emotional experience towards external objective requirements and it is heteronomous; while sense of responsibility

stresses on initiative conscious attitude and emotion and it is self-disciplined. Therefore, we can see that sense of obligation is the lower and embryonic stage of sense of responsibility; sense of responsibility is the sublimation and internalized emotion based on external provisions of sense of obligation and it is a more advanced emotional experience than sense of obligation.

Therefore, sense of responsibility is the psychological state and emotional attitude when an individual proactively perform his responsibilities. Sense of responsibility refers to the subject’s psychological foundation and motivation when assuming and practicing responsibilities and it is a key component of responsibility.

In western culture, especially in research fields such as philosophy, psychology, ethics and education, they use the term responsibility. In Western psychology dictionaries, we do not find terms like the sense of responsibility. However, in China, in daily life as well as academic researches, words like responsibility and sense of responsibility are widely used. The appearance of these words is clearly related to particular Chinese cultural background.

Studies on eastern and western cultures find that, “In Western culture, people tend to take themselves as independent individuals and exclusive presence; in Eastern culture, people generally regard themselves as the product that individuals are interrelated to society.” When some scholars study responsibility in culture, they point out that, “Responsibility will inevitable be engraved with the unique cultural imprint of the region and it shows its typical cultural dependence.” Therefore, in western cultural context, they don’t encourage people taking social responsibilities and it mainly manifests self-responsibility-centered contractual liability; while in cultural Chinese culture, we emphasize social responsibilities as “the world’s rise and fall is everyone’s responsibility” and “we should be concerned about the country first and enjoy later,” which stresses individuals’ responsibility to others and the society as well as the self-discipline of responsibility. When the author reviews literatures, he finds that it is very common that “heart of responsibility” and sense of responsibility is mixed without any distinction. Therefore, in order to accurately interpret the sense of responsibility, we believe it is necessary to make a clearer comparison and distinction among “esponsibility, sense of responsibility and heart of responsibility.

On the differences among the concept of responsibility, “heart of responsibility” and sense of responsibility, most scholars in academic circle believe they are different just as the detailed list of conceptual analysis of sense of responsibility. Some scholars expressly point out that, we should understand the concept of responsibility under Chinese cultural background and further explain the difference between the concept of responsibility and sense of responsibility:

Responsibility contains both responsible obligations and responsible negligence; heart of responsibility is divided into heart of responsibility to responsible events and moral heart of responsibility and it does not contain the heart of responsible negligence; heart of responsibility is the important content of an individual's psychological qualities and it mainly belongs to the content of psychological education and moral education. Responsibility is a concept proposed for restricting people's behavior from social justice and social presence and it is the content of psychological and moral educational research as well as the scope of legal research. (Zhao & Zhang, 2006)

Obviously, this kind of concept clearly says that responsibility, heart of responsibility and Sense of responsibility should be strictly distinguished. A domestic scholar, Ye Haosheng does not agree. He believes that the inner connotations of heart of responsibility and sense of responsibility are very close to that of responsibility and they ever are the same, i.e. an internal individual prescription based on external prescription in terms of one's behavior (Ye, 2009). At the same time, some researchers propose a list of the concepts of the heart of responsibility. Based on this, Ye Haosheng's team sorts out the definition of related concepts like the consciousness of responsibility and sense of responsibility and so on. They find that these definitions almost contain all the content of responsibility from the psychological perspective and they can be divided into three big categories: The first category can be called as a static definition of the quality of responsibility; they take heart of responsibility as a certain quality, attitude, belief, ability, state, habit and tendency and etc.. Another category can be called as responsible emotions and they refer to emotional activities caused by responsible events. The third category can be called as a dynamic definition of cognitive responsibility. They take heart of responsibility as certain cognition, mechanism, awareness, expectation, process and so on (Li & Ye, 2009).

On the difference between heart of responsibility and sense of responsibility, a more representative point of view would be the research of Yan Guocai and Liu Guohua. Professor Yan Guocai proposes that responsible awareness, responsible emotions, responsible will and responsible actions constitute heart of responsibility and he further analyzes the emotional experience of heart of social responsibility and believes that the core of heart of social responsibility is the sense of social responsibility (Yan, 2001). Liu Guohua and Zhang Jijia propose similar opinions when they study the psychological structure of the heart of responsibility and they believe that sense of responsibility includes responsible awareness, responsible emotions and responsible actions. They also stresses that responsible emotions are sense of responsibility and sense of responsibility forms based on responsible awareness, which acts as a stimulation, inspiration and evaluation of people's responsible actions and plays a pivotal role in an individual's

responsible actions (Liu & Zhang, 1997). To sum up, the above mentioned scholars regard heart of responsibility as an important constitutional factor of heart of responsibility and the bridge which help responsible awareness transfers to responsible behavior. They clearly distinguish the two concepts. However, at the same time, a number of domestic researches generally regard the two concepts as the same. Some researchers expressly point out that: "Heart of responsibility, also known as sense of responsibility, refers to an individual's emotional experience and corresponding behavior when he is faced with his social role and the responsibility his role has to assume." (Jin & Yang, 2004) This is a generalized heart of responsibility which includes three psychological contents of cognition, emotion and behavior. Some researchers believe sense of responsibility is heart of responsibility or responsible awareness, referring to individual's behavior choices, behavior process and emotional experience when he has to assume social responsibilities as well as responsibilities regarding to his own development.

To conclude the above-mentioned points of view, the author believes that, the concepts of responsibility, sense of responsibility and heart of responsibility are very close and they all refer to an individual's or an organization's proactive commitment to social norms and and the result or tendency of its internalization. However, responsibility stresses the duty, obligations which should be assumed and untaken punishment. It is the "responsibility which should be undertaken" or "the punishment which should be held" and it is an objective reality. It must be who is responsible to whom and it expresses as a social relationship. As Hayek points out that, "The reason why the concept of responsibility gradually evolves into a legal concept or mainly indicates as a legal concept is that, in terms of whether an individual's behavior causes a legal obligation or whether he should accept punishment, the law requires an accurate standard for judgment." However, sense of responsibility belongs to a conscious category, and it is a reflection of the objective presence of "responsible relationship". It stresses emotional experience related to the undertaking of responsibility and the consequence of the behavior. Therefore, we believe that sense of responsibility is one of the most important elements of responsibility.

Furthermore, when we compare heart of responsibility and sense of responsibility, we will find that "heart of sense of responsibility" tends to be regarded as quality, attitude, belief, ability and tendency related to responsibility and it is a relatively stable and static psychological quality; however, sense of responsibility stresses more on the dynamic emotional experience related to responsibility and it is a process through rational cultivation and training so as to achieve internalization. This might be one of the important reasons why

psychological circle studies more heart of responsibility and educational and sociological explore more on “ense of responsibility.

2. RESEARCH ON SENSE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In the Chinese collectivist cultural background, research on sense of responsibility mainly focuses on sense of social responsibility. Most of them choose college students as their research objects. Research on college students’ sense of responsibility mainly starts from the present status and then based on theoretical analysis, proposes corresponding cultivation strategies and implementation approaches.

2.1 Research on the Present Status of Sense of Social Responsibility

Chinese scholars mainly analyze the present status of sense of social responsibility from a list of phenomena and their description. Peng Lan believes that, now a part of college students lack sense of social responsibility which mainly shows in their focus on individual dreams while lack of social dreams, emphasis on self-value while lack of social value, admiration of money and lack the pursuit of their cause and with a strong self-responsible awareness while weak social responsible awareness (Peng, 1999). Yu Honglang believes that, compared with Xu Benyu and Li Qiang Event, the fact that a part of college students’ sense of social responsibility is so weak is much concerned, which shows in the following aspects: they focus on personal future; in terms of life goal, the increasingly strong personal awareness has gradually replaced overall awareness and social awareness, blind self-expansion and potential inferiority consciousness. They stress self-value and weaken social value (Yu, 2006). There are also a number of survey researches discussing the status of college students’ sense of social responsibility, especially in some degree dissertations. For example, some researchers find that the mainstream in terms of college students’ sense of social responsibility is healthy and positive through surveys; however, they also point out some problems regarding college students’ sense of social responsibility: their understanding level of sense of social responsibility is not high enough; their responsible awareness and behavior are contradictory; practicality and utilitarian tendencies are obvious; they seriously lack sense of responsibility to life, behavior and gratitude (Yu, 2012). We find that, although some researches have affirmed that modern college student group represents a positive and enterprising spirit and convey positive engage to society, problems in the lack or weakening of college students’ sense of social responsibility have drawn the attention of high educators and researchers. The problems mainly focus on: first, in terms of life dreams and values,

some college students stress the realization of personal value and they have a strong sense of self-responsibility and a weak sense of social responsibility; second, in terms of interest relationship, it indicates an obvious tendency of utilitarianism and egoism.

2.2 Research on the Influential Factors of Sense of Social Responsibility

On the exploration of what factors influence sense of social responsibility, most researchers agree that the degree of sense of social responsibility is the result of subjective and objective factors. Studies of domestic scholars find that the influential factors of the formation and development of contemporary college students’ sense of social responsibility include the following: social political, economic and cultural factors, including the reform and development of colleges and universities, school education factors including college teachers’ behavior and college students and college students’ own factors. It emphasizes that the influence of social politics, economy and culture, as the main three elements of the social environment, to the formation and development of college students has exceeded school education and become the top 1 influential factor (Duan, 1999). Some scholars point out that college students’ sense of social responsibility drops which can be seen from its current status and analyze the reasons from the perspective of society, family, school and college students themselves.

On the subjective factors, more researches are on the influential factors such as self-awareness (including self-esteem) and personality. Wang Youming, in his master’s dissertation *The Structural Loss of Contemporary College Students’ Self-awareness and the Cultivation of Sense of Social Responsibility*, believes that the externalized manifestation of the structural lack of contemporary college students’ self-awareness is their stress on personal and related small circle’s interests and the alienation of sense of social responsibility. He tries to explore the reasons from the realistic and historical roots, tending to promote the re-construction of college students’ sense of social responsibility (Wang, 2004). Contemporary psychologists and ethicists, studying from different perspectives, share the opinion that self-esteem and sense of responsibility have the strongest migration ability in human emotions and determine the significant correlations between them, i.e. the loss of self-esteem is the greatest emotional disorder of weak sense of social responsibility. College students, as “social people”, have strong self-esteem needs. When they receive good social evaluations, they are active to participate in social activities and willing to take on more responsibilities; on the contrary, if their self-esteem is hurt, they are prone to have inferiority, show less interest, become indifferent to others and the society, and their sense of responsibility might drop. Connor’s research on the relationship between college students’

sense of social responsibility and social attribution and personality finds that, personality factors that affect sense of social responsibility include self-center, compassion, mutual acceptance, authority and the same experience, etc. and he further investigates the correlation degree and finds out that the R value of sense of social responsibility and cognitive ability is up to 0.87 (Connor, 1982). Domestic scholars conduct further research on the relationship between sense of social responsibility and personality. Liu Haitao and some other scholars adopt scales to conduct survey among college students and the result shows that the neuroticism, psychoticism, introversion and extroversion of one's personality are significantly related to one's overall psychological presence of social responsibility. Introversion and extroversion are positively correlated to each dimension of social responsible psychology with a positive predictive power; psychoticism is negative correlated to each dimension of social responsible psychology with a reverse predictive power; neuroticism is negatively correlated to each dimension of social responsible psychology (Liu & Zheng, 2010). Professor Fan Fumin once proposed that, a college student's sound personality mainly includes ideological elements, scientific and cultural elements, psychological elements, physical elements and other elements, specifically it includes the following aspects: a strong sense of innovation, noble pursuit of life, rich human literacy, good social morality, necessary literal and artistic literacy and mental health awareness (Fan, 2002). When we analyze these personality elements, we find that some elements are directly related to sense of responsibility. For example, a strong sense of innovation requires not only excellent expertise and skills, but also courage and determination to identify social needs and the spirit of continuing to practice; noble pursuit of life directly reflects in the strong sense of responsibility to collective interests and the interests of the whole society; good social morality is of course the basic requirement of citizens with sense of social responsibility. There are some researches propose from theoretical analysis that sense of responsibility is the main content of sound personality and it has important influence to a sound personality. From this we can see that, the academic circle generally believes that college students' personality is one of the subjective factors which influence their sense of social responsibility. Whether college students have the compassion of the society and whether they have a sound personality and self-esteem are directly influenced the formation and development of their sense of social responsibility.

On the objective factors, it is mainly based on the systematic perspective of family, school and society. Family factors are mainly focuses on exploration of the influence of family cultivating ways to sense of social responsibility. Zhang Li and some other scholars find that

positive cultivating ways make children feel more care and love in their growth which is good to the cultivation of children's sense of responsibility; however, negative cultivating ways make children have the cognitive modes of negative, inferior and passive and indifferent to themselves, others and the group which is disadvantageous to the cultivation of sense of responsibility (L. Zhang, Mao, & Zhangn, 2009). Liu Haitao and other scholars through empirical studies find that, there are significant differences in each dimension of college students' sense of social responsibility due to parents' cultivating ways. With democratic cultivating way, college students' sense of social responsibility is at the highest level; with permissive parenting way, children's sense of social responsibility is at the lowest level. Parents are the first teacher of their children. Parents' cultivating way and family atmosphere directly influence the formation of children's sense of responsibility (Liu, Zheng, & Nie, 2001). In the aspect of school factors, some researchers stress that universities should fully play the role of ideological course, train a teacher team of high quality, fully play the leading role of university cultural activities, and play the role of social practice to further strengthen the sense of social responsibility of college students (Shao, 2012). Chen Zhifei's research on the sense of social responsibility of university volunteers finds that, college students' sense of social responsibility is significantly related to their voluntary activities, but their sense of social responsibility will not improve because of their regular voluntary activities. However, if they understand the nature and content of the activity, their sense of social responsibility will be significantly improved (Chen, 2012). The influence of social factors on sense of social responsibility cannot be ignored either, especially the negative effect of market economy. Market economy emphasizes individual interests and the difference among individuals which might easily make people produce the idea of individual first and money first (Wang, 2006). Some scholars think we should analyze the influential factors of sense of social responsibility under the big social environment. Incomplete responsible education and single educational approach and method in universities as well the fact that most of them are single-child in their family weaken the sense of social responsibility of college students (Shi, 2010).

2.3 Research on the Cultivation of Sense of Social Responsibility

To implement research on sense of social responsibility, it means the cultivation of sense of social responsibility, to find the strategies or approaches to achieve the purpose. Chinese scholars have conducted extensive discussion on the cultivation of sense of social responsibility. The first type is discussion on principles. Jiang Guoyong and some

other scholars propose four principles to cultivate sense of responsibility: Progressive principle of the content and goals, the principle of subjectivity, moderate indoctrination and positive guidance, the principle of actively attending social practice, and the principle of integration of society, family and school (Jiang & Ying, 2004). The expansion of individual's sense of social responsibility can only be achieved through the individual's own expansion and sublimation of "acknowledgement, love, rationality and passion". Based on this, Liu Tiefang proposes three fundamental principles in the cultivation of students' sense of social responsibility and they are the principle of subjectivity, the principle of cultural orientation, and the principle of exchange-practice. The principle of subjectivity is a prerequisite for the cultivation of sense of social responsibility which advocates respecting students' rights of individual development and personal happiness, and affirming and respecting individual values, dignity and independence; the principle of cultural orientation means to cultivate sense of social responsibility by passing cultural spirits which believes that the essence of cultivation of sense of social responsibility is actually cultural identity; principle of exchange-practice believes that we should lay the foundation of the cultivation of sense of social responsibility on students' "world", concern and guide the construction of students' relationship with their surrounding world, make the education of sense of responsibility become real education in their real life and oppose to empty talk away from real life. The second type of discussion is on specific strategies and approaches. Some scholars conclude that the responsible education of college students are faced with three issues: rigid approaches, vague content, and poor timeliness, propose that regarding the methods that teachers implement responsible education can choose effective ways, including language, example, context, environment, experience and incentive ways which provides operational and feasible guidance for the implementation of college students' responsible education (Xia, 2006).

In terms of specific approaches, Cao Wenze, starting from the social responsible educational system, proposes that: in the content of social responsible education, we should effectively use local cultural resources to enhance contemporary young generation's cultural identity; in the way of social responsible education, we should combine contemporary young generation's realization of individual values with the assumption of social responsibilities; in the genre of social responsible education, we should convert the knowledge learning of students into inner dreams and believes, based on the theoretical research of social responsible education, continue to enhance comparative and analytical research, and learn from other countries' experience and practice in social responsible education (Cao, 2012). Some researchers think the

cultivation approaches of sense of social responsibility include: a) correct guidance to break through traditional moral education model; b) group study to enhance similar cultural awareness; c) free choice for autonomy for the assumption of responsibility; d) social practice to enhance the sense of responsibility (Xia, 2012).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Chinese scholars have conducted a lot of researches on sense of social responsibility, especially on the sense of social responsibility of college students which are relatively comprehensive and has enriched people's understanding and practice of sense of social responsibility. In these researches, scholars study the current status and influential factors of sense of social responsibility and have gained reliable conclusions. They also take efforts to study the strategies and approaches of the cultivation of sense of social responsibility and achieve some results. These researches are advantageous to further researches on sense of social responsibility. However, there are some questions worth further study.

First, the research subject can be more specific. Most of researches on sense of social responsibility focus on college students. There are few researches on sense of social responsibility of other groups like enterprises, governmental officials, corporate managers, etc. They are very influential on the society; therefore there are more social responsibilities on their shoulders. Besides, for researches on college students, there is a tendency of "stressing universities and lightening vocational colleges". By retrieving China's largest academic database, China Journal Net, the author retrieved 5,447 articles on college students' sense of social responsibility and 268 articles on vocational college students' sense of social responsibility. Through title retrieving, the author found 379 articles titled college students' sense of social responsibility and only 35 articles titled vocational college students' sense of social responsibility. Meanwhile, there are some master's dissertations and main authoritative journal articles on college students' sense of social responsibility and these researches are in depth, systematic and comprehensive; however, researches on vocational college students' sense of social responsibility are mostly journal articles and there are very few published on quality journals and even fewer in master's or doctoral dissertations. Two retrieving ways indicate that, compared with researches on general college students' sense of social responsibility, researches on vocational college students' sense of social responsibility are relatively weak. The number of vocational college students is quite large; however, the attention on them is not much. The degree of vocational college students' sense of social responsibility will directly affect social services and product quality as well as production efficiency and economic construction.

Researches on vocational students' "sense of social responsibility" should get more attention from education practitioners and theoretical researchers.

Second, the research paradigm needs to be further standardized. Chinese currently social responsibility research paradigm has an obvious tendency of "stressing speculative researches and ignoring empirical researches". Studies of social responsibility need to be further standardized in terms of research methods and paradigms. Most studies are on speculative theory or status descriptive, and there are few good combinations of both. Theoretical studies lack concerns of reality, status researches lack in-depth theoretical analysis. In particular, there lack standard empirical researches. Current researches focus on one aspect of college students' sense of social responsibility, and the researches are mainly based on speculations, or status descriptions, or lists of phenomenon, or summaries of the problems, or elaboration of the meaning and value of social responsibility. Studies of the sense of social responsibility of undergraduate students are mainly descriptive, but they lack in depth theoretical analysis of the reasons related to it. Party workers, ideological educators and counselors are the research subject of college students' sense of social responsibility, so the theoretical level of the studies is relatively limited. Professional education theorists and moral experts specializing in the sense of social responsibility of college students are very limited. It also lacks analysis of the concept of sense of social responsibility. The very few researches have some problems in defining the concept of sense of social responsibility. The representative and persuasive power of questionnaires based on unreasonable definitions are naturally relatively limited. Therefore, future research should focus on the use of standardized research methods.

Third, the study logic needs to be more systematic. Current research on the sense of social responsibility in China is from a macro level of analysis to explain the importance of social responsibility with the less consideration of the constitution and influential factors of sense of social responsibility from a micro-level; or it is from the micro-level to study the influential factors of sense of social responsibility and related research mainly focuses on the micro level (self-awareness and personality) and intermediate links (such as family and school), and it apparently lacks macro-level concerns. Two studies have an indispensable academic value, but they are biased in some way, and it is difficult to propose reasonable suggestions regarding the current status of sense of social responsibility, influential factors and its education and cultivating approaches and strategies. Therefore, this trade-off logic of study must be taken seriously and change in future studies. Only by using systematic research logic and making full use of the combination of micro and macro levels as well as the

combination of history and logic, can we make a really high quality research on sense of social responsibility.

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