

Psychological Representations and Educational Optimization Pathways of the Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation

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Abstract: *Strengthening the sense of community for the Chinese nation has become an important educational task in contemporary China. From a psychological perspective, this sense of community is not merely a political concept to be memorized, but a complex social-cognitive representation involving knowledge, emotion, identity, value judgment, and behavioral orientation. Primary and secondary school students are in a critical period of cognitive development, moral development, and social identity formation. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how students understand, represent, and internalize the sense of community for the Chinese nation. Drawing on social information processing theory, word association research, sense of community theory, social identity theory, and multicultural education research, this paper discusses the psychological representations of the sense of community for the Chinese nation among primary and secondary school students and proposes educational optimization pathways. It argues that word association tasks can reveal students' spontaneous semantic networks and conceptual accessibility related to national unity, ethnic diversity, cultural identity, and shared destiny. The paper further suggests that education on the sense of community for the Chinese nation should be developmentally appropriate, emotionally engaging, and activity-based. Specifically, schools should move beyond concept-centered instruction and develop integrated educational practices that combine cognitive understanding, emotional identification, and behavioral participation.*

Keywords: Sense of community for the Chinese nation, Primary and secondary school students, Word association, Psychological representation, Social identity, Educational optimization.

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1. Introduction

The sense of community for the Chinese nation refers to a shared consciousness through which individuals understand different ethnic groups as members of an interdependent national community. It involves not only knowledge about ethnic groups and national history, but also emotional attachment, cultural identification, and a sense of shared future. In school education, strengthening this sense of community is especially important because children and adolescents are still developing their cognitive structures, moral judgments, and social identities.

From the perspective of psychology, the formation of a collective consciousness cannot be understood simply as the transmission of political knowledge. Rather, it is a process in which individuals encode, organize, store, retrieve, and evaluate social information. Social information processing theory emphasizes that individuals construct representations of people, groups, events, and social relations on the basis of prior knowledge and situational cues [1,2]. Therefore, students' understanding of the sense of community for the Chinese nation should be examined as a psychological representation that contains cognitive, emotional, and value-related components.

The word association task provides a useful method for studying such psychological representations. Classical studies of word association suggest that individuals' responses to stimulus words reflect the structure and accessibility of semantic memory [3–5]. In education research, word association has also been used to assess students' conceptual

structures and conceptual change [6,7]. Compared with closed-ended questionnaires, generative word association tasks allow students to freely produce concepts that are automatically activated by a stimulus word. Thus, they are suitable for exploring how students represent abstract concepts such as “national community,” “ethnic unity,” “Chinese culture,” and “shared destiny.”

The concept of “sense of community” has also been widely discussed in community psychology. McMillan and Chavis defined sense of community as a feeling that members have of belonging, mutual influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection [8]. Although the sense of community for the Chinese nation has its own specific historical, political, and cultural connotations, this psychological framework is useful for understanding how collective belonging, emotional connection, shared identity, and mutual responsibility become internalized at the individual level.

This paper focuses on the psychological representations and educational optimization pathways of the sense of community for the Chinese nation among primary and secondary school students. It aims to answer three questions. First, why can the sense of community for the Chinese nation be understood as a social-cognitive representation? Second, why is the word association task suitable for examining students' understanding of this concept? Third, how can school education be optimized according to students' cognitive and social developmental characteristics?

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Social Information Processing and Psychological Representation

Social cognition research suggests that individuals do not process social information as isolated fragments. Instead, they organize information into structured representations that guide later memory, judgment, and behavior [1]. When students encounter concepts related to the Chinese nation, ethnic unity, cultural heritage, and collective belonging, they interpret these concepts through prior knowledge, school experience, family education, peer communication, and media exposure.

Wyer and Radvansky further argued that social information comprehension involves not only the encoding of external information but also the validation of its meaning in relation to existing knowledge [2]. This is important for understanding the sense of community for the Chinese nation. Students may know the phrase “ethnic unity,” but the psychological depth of this concept depends on whether they can connect it with historical memory, cultural exchange, mutual dependence, national identity, and real-life behavior.

In this sense, the sense of community for the Chinese nation can be treated as a structured psychological representation. It may include cognitive elements such as “56 ethnic groups,” “Chinese culture,” and “national unity”; emotional elements such as “pride,” “belonging,” and “warmth”; and behavioral elements such as “cooperation,” “respect,” and “mutual help.” The richer and more organized these elements are, the more likely students are to develop a stable and meaningful sense of community.

2.2 Word Association as a Method for Assessing Students’ Conceptual Structures

The word association task has a long history in psychological research. Kent and Rosanoff used word association to investigate patterns of verbal response [3], and later work showed that associations among words can reflect the structure of semantic memory and conceptual organization [4,5]. Nelson et al. developed large-scale free association norms, further demonstrating the value of word association data for studying semantic networks [5].

In education research, word association has been used to understand students’ knowledge structures. Shavelson argued that the relationships among students’ word associations could reveal their cognitive structures in a subject area [6]. Hovardas and Korfiatis applied word association procedures to assess conceptual change in science education [7]. These studies indicate that word association tasks can be used not only in basic cognitive research but also in educational contexts to examine how learners organize and retrieve knowledge.

For research on the sense of community for the Chinese nation, word association tasks have two advantages. First, they can reveal students’ spontaneous conceptual activation. When students are given stimulus words such as “Chinese nation,” “ethnic unity,” or “Chinese culture,” the words they generate

can show what concepts are most accessible in their minds. Second, word association responses can be coded into different categories, such as historical cognition, cultural identity, emotional belonging, ethnic unity, national identity, and behavioral practice. These categories can help researchers understand whether students’ representations remain at a surface level or have developed into deeper cultural and identity-related structures.

2.3 Sense of Community, Social Identity, and Common Ingroup Identity

The sense of community for the Chinese nation can be discussed not only from the perspective of social identity, but also from the broader psychological concept of sense of community. According to McMillan and Chavis, sense of community includes membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection [8]. These elements are closely related to collective belonging, emotional identification, and perceived interdependence. Therefore, examining students’ sense of community requires attention to both their cognitive understanding of national and ethnic concepts and their emotional connection with a shared community.

The sense of community for the Chinese nation is also closely related to social identity. According to social identity theory, individuals define themselves partly through their group memberships, and these memberships influence self-concept, group belonging, and intergroup attitudes [9]. Self-categorization theory further explains how people classify themselves and others into social groups and how such categorization shapes social perception and behavior [10].

The common ingroup identity model provides a particularly useful framework for understanding education on the sense of community. Gaertner and Dovidio argued that intergroup bias can be reduced when members of different groups are recategorized as members of a more inclusive common group [11,12]. This model suggests that education should help students understand ethnic diversity within a shared national community. In the Chinese context, this means guiding students to recognize both the diversity of ethnic cultures and the unity of the Chinese nation.

Intergroup contact theory also offers important implications. Allport proposed that positive contact between groups can reduce prejudice under appropriate conditions [13]. Pettigrew and Tropp’s meta-analysis provided broad evidence that intergroup contact generally reduces prejudice [14]. In school settings, cooperative activities, shared cultural experiences, and structured intergroup communication may help students develop a more inclusive sense of belonging.

2.4 Adolescence, Identity Development, and School Education

Primary and secondary school students are in a critical period of identity development. Erikson described adolescence as a key stage for identity formation [15], while Marcia proposed identity status theory to explain different patterns of identity exploration and commitment [16]. In relation to ethnic and

cultural identity, Phinney developed the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, which has been widely used to examine ethnic identity across diverse groups [17]. Later studies have shown that ethnic-racial identity is associated with adolescents' psychosocial, academic, and health outcomes [18,19].

Schools play an important role in this developmental process. Verhoeven, Poorthuis, and Volman reviewed research on the role of school in adolescents' identity development and showed that school experiences, peer relationships, classroom climate, and educational practices all contribute to students' personal and social identity development [20]. This suggests that the cultivation of the sense of community for the Chinese nation should not rely only on textbooks or formal instruction. It should also be embedded in school culture, classroom interaction, extracurricular activities, and students' everyday social experiences.

3. Current Challenges in Education on the Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation

3.1 Mismatch between Abstract Concepts and Students' Developmental Levels

One major challenge is that the educational content may not always match students' developmental levels. Primary school students often rely on concrete images, stories, and everyday experiences to understand abstract ideas. If instruction focuses mainly on abstract concepts such as "community consciousness," "cultural identity," or "shared destiny," younger students may memorize these terms without fully understanding their meanings.

Cognitive developmental theory suggests that children's thinking develops gradually from concrete operations to more abstract and formal reasoning [21]. Moral development theories also indicate that children and adolescents differ in their ability to understand rules, responsibility, justice, and social obligations [22]. Therefore, education on the sense of community for the Chinese nation should be adapted to students' cognitive and moral developmental levels.

For primary school students, education should be based on concrete materials such as ethnic festivals, clothing, songs, stories, traditional art, and daily examples of mutual help. For junior high school students, teaching can include historical cases of ethnic interaction, regional cultural exchange, and social responsibility. For senior high school students, education can further address historical logic, cultural continuity, national development, and theoretical understanding.

3.2 Insufficient Depth of Conceptual Understanding

A second challenge is that students' understanding may remain at the level of simple recognition. Some students may associate the sense of community mainly with words such as "China," "ethnic groups," and "unity," but may not generate deeper concepts such as "shared history," "cultural integration," "mutual dependence," "collective identity," or "common future."

From the perspective of semantic memory, this suggests that some students' conceptual networks may be relatively simple and loosely organized. A strong psychological representation of the sense of community should include not only factual knowledge but also emotional identification and behavioral orientation. It should help students understand why different ethnic groups are interdependent, how cultural exchange has shaped the Chinese nation, and how individuals can practice unity in everyday life.

3.3 Overreliance on Lecture-based Instruction

A third challenge is the limited diversity of teaching methods. Lecture-based instruction is useful for explaining basic knowledge, but it may not be sufficient for developing emotional identification and behavioral commitment. Research on multicultural education and citizenship education emphasizes that identity-related education should involve experience, dialogue, participation, and reflection [23–25].

If students only receive conceptual instruction, their learning may remain external and passive. By contrast, activity-based learning, cooperative tasks, cultural exhibitions, word association activities, storytelling, and project-based learning can help students connect abstract concepts with concrete experiences. Such practices are more likely to promote meaningful understanding and psychological internalization.

4. Educational Optimization Pathways

4.1 Designing Developmentally Appropriate Education

Education on the sense of community for the Chinese nation should be designed according to students' developmental characteristics. At the primary school level, teachers should use concrete, visual, and story-based materials. Traditional festivals, ethnic costumes, folk art, music, painting, and local cultural stories can help students form intuitive impressions of ethnic diversity and national unity.

At the junior high school level, students can be guided to understand historical and social relationships among ethnic groups. Teachers may use maps, timelines, historical narratives, and group projects to help students understand cultural exchange and social interdependence. At the senior high school level, students can engage in more abstract discussion, social investigation, and research-based learning. They can be encouraged to analyze how the Chinese nation has been formed through long-term interaction, exchange, and integration among different ethnic groups.

4.2 Integrating Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior

The cultivation of the sense of community should include cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. The cognitive dimension involves knowledge about ethnic diversity, Chinese culture, historical interaction, and national unity. The emotional dimension involves pride, belonging, respect, closeness, and identification. The behavioral dimension involves cooperation, mutual help, respect for diversity, and active participation in school and community life.

A word association task can also be used as an educational assessment tool. If students mainly generate factual words, teachers may need to strengthen emotional and behavioral education. If students generate emotional words but lack historical and cultural concepts, teachers may need to enrich their knowledge base. If students can generate words across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral categories, this may indicate a more comprehensive psychological representation.

4.3 Using Activity-based and Experiential Teaching

Schools should reduce overreliance on lecture-based instruction and increase activity-based, experiential, and participatory teaching. For example, teachers can organize “Chinese cultural symbols” exhibitions, ethnic art appreciation activities, group storytelling, word association games, cultural mapping, role play, and project-based learning. These activities can help students experience the relationship between ethnic diversity and national unity.

Intergroup contact theory suggests that positive interaction can improve intergroup attitudes under appropriate conditions [13,14]. In school settings, cooperative activities involving students from different backgrounds can help build mutual understanding. The common ingroup identity model further suggests that these activities should not erase ethnic diversity, but should guide students to understand diversity within a shared national community [11,12].

4.4 Establishing a Multi-method Evaluation System

Finally, schools should develop a multi-method evaluation system. Traditional questionnaires can measure students’ explicit attitudes, but they may be influenced by social desirability. Word association tasks can reveal spontaneous semantic activation. Reflection writing can reveal students’ personal understanding. Classroom observation can provide behavioral evidence. Combining these methods can provide a more comprehensive picture of students’ psychological representations.

In future research, generative word association tasks and selective word association tasks can be combined. Generative tasks reveal what students can spontaneously produce, while selective tasks examine how students judge the relevance and strength of given words. These data can also be used for machine learning analysis to identify different patterns of students’ community consciousness and provide individualized educational feedback.

5. Conclusion

The sense of community for the Chinese nation is a complex psychological representation involving cognition, emotion, identity, value, and behavior. For primary and secondary school students, this representation is shaped by cognitive development, school education, peer interaction, family experience, and broader cultural contexts. Word association tasks provide a useful method for examining students’ spontaneous conceptual networks and identifying the depth of their understanding.

This paper suggests that education on the sense of community

for the Chinese nation should be developmentally appropriate, psychologically grounded, and pedagogically diversified. Schools should move from concept-centered instruction to integrated education that combines knowledge learning, emotional experience, and behavioral practice. Through word association assessment, activity-based teaching, cultural experience, and multi-method evaluation, educators can better understand students’ psychological representations and promote deeper internalization of the sense of community for the Chinese nation.

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