

# Cracking "Rational Ignorance" With Institutional Arrangement: A Study on the Reasons and Countermeasures for the Lack of Willingness to Express Community Public Service Needs of Urban Residents

## — A Survey Based on Dalian City Community

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### Abstract

In order to further optimize the supply of community public services and meet the needs of residents for a better life in the community, this paper takes the behavioral hypothesis of "rational ignorance" as the framework for analysis and explores the root causes of the lack of willingness of urban residents to express their needs for community public services. The low civic awareness, high costs and low returns are the essential reasons for the lack of willingness of urban residents to express their needs, and they are also the endogenous factors influencing the low participation of urban residents in community governance and the poor performance of community public service provision. With the help of Williamson's institutional hierarchy framework, this paper proposes countermeasures for the lack of willingness of urban residents to express their needs for community public services from different levels of institutional arrangements in order to create a sound and complete environment for residents to express their needs, thereby alleviating the contradiction between supply and demand of urban community public services and building a new pattern of community governance that is jointly negotiated, built, and shared.

**Keywords:** urban community public service, demand expression, rational ignorance, institutional

### 1. Problem Formulation and Research Review

#### 1.1 Problem Formulation

At present, the main contradiction of China's society has changed to the contradiction between people's growing need for a better life and unbalanced and insufficient development. Due to the diversification of values, urban community residents present heterogeneous, different and hierarchical needs and preferences for public services (Li De & Yu Hongshen, 2016). As a basic place of production and social governance, the community naturally carries the responsibility of safeguarding the fundamental interests of the people and satisfying the needs of the residents, but due to the fact that the standardization of urban community construction still needs to be improved, there are still practical problems such as unclear boundaries of administrative power, low efficiency and insufficient organizational collaboration. In the long run, the solidarity gap between community public service providers and community residents will seriously affect the healthy development of urban community governance and lower the quality of life of the people.

In order to further optimize the supply of community public services and meet the needs of residents for a better life in the community, this paper combines the results of a survey on the community of Dalian city and explores the root causes of the lack of willingness of urban residents to express their needs for community public services. It is hoped that by implementing more effective institutional arrangements to create a sound and complete environment for residents' expression, the contradiction between supply and demand of public services in urban communities will be alleviated, and a new pattern of community governance will be built.

## 1.2 Research Review

From the literature, it can be concluded that the current research on the issue of "demand expression" in community governance is broadly divided into two levels: micro and macro. At the micro level, demand expression is the behavior of community residents for the right to obtain the community public services they need; at the macro level, it is more often used by scholars as a mechanism to improve the efficiency of community public service provision and governance performance, namely the process of collecting, integrating, transforming and responding to the public service demand information of community target groups and the corresponding institutional guarantee (Teng Jie, 2020).

While "demand expression" has been explored only as an individual behavior of community residents, some scholars have analyzed the reasons for the problem of public service expression of rural residents and concluded that the role conflict between rational government design and villagers' emotional choice (Xia Yuzhen & Yang Yongwei, 2014), the contradiction between limited rationality and collective rationality (Dong Shaolin & Cai Yongfeng, 2014), and the "rational ignorance" and "path blocking" are the causes of the problem. The findings include the dual dilemma of "rational ignorance" and "path closure" (Deng Nianguo & Weng Shengyang, 2012), and less willingness to express the needs of urban community residents. However, at the same time, whether they are willing to express their own needs for community public services to community managers and whether they are willing to propose to them as co-governors and masters, thus leading to the improvement of the entire community public service supply capacity and governance level, this representation has been incorporated by many scholars into the field of "mass participation," "resident autonomy," and "grassroots democracy". We need to help the public to participate in community governance through the methods of "returning power", "empowerment", and "restitution", so as to solve the shortcomings of high participation costs and poor participation channels for community residents (Pu Xinwei & Heng Yuanyuan, 2021). Analyze the structure of community relations from the logic of community actors and break the "rational ignorance" of community residents who are willing to be spectators and enjoyers in community governance (Chen Weidong, 2018); In response to this current governance dilemma in urban communities that community residents are far from taking up their responsibilities and obligations to participate in community governance, a community governance model with a balance of residents' rights and obligations should be constructed (Yu Zucheng & Huang Jiachen, 2020). As a typical extension of the issue of community residents' demand expression, the above studies, to varying degrees, suggest that the reluctance to express their demand for community public services, their unwillingness to communicate and give feedback to relevant departments, and their choice to observe and ignore the current situation of community public services are all manifestations of community residents' insufficient participation in community governance as owners, and their reasons and countermeasures need to be explored.

On the other hand, when it is elevated to an institutional arrangement, the mechanism for expressing residents' needs in various community public service areas has been widely studied by scholars. For example, Yang Ke and Wang Zhitao constructed an artificial intelligence-enabled community home care service model to more accurately identify elderly people's needs (Yang Ke & Wang Zhitao, 2020); Chen Dexu and Guo Xiujin analyzed the demand for public sports services of a community sample in Shanghai and worked to establish a coupling mechanism between it and government supply to bridge the current discrepancy in government response to community residents' needs (Chen Dexu & Guo Xiujin, 2017); Zhang Qing subdivided the demand expression process into object, subject and public goods supplier, and designed a perfect demand expression process in order to effectively express and respond to the needs of rural consumer subjects for community public culture (Zhang Qing, 2017).

It can be seen that adequate demand expression by community residents not only ensures the acquisition and realization of their own interests, but also, to some extent, is a manifestation of participation in social governance and the development of residents' autonomy; a large number of findings on the demand expression mechanism of community governance also confirm the feasibility of analysis at the institutional level when summarizing countermeasures and suggestions. However, it is not difficult to find that when discussing the behavior of residents in expressing their needs for community public services, there are more studies on rural residents and fewer studies on urban residents; there are more studies on the construction of macro governance models and mechanisms, but fewer studies on the logic of individual behavior at the micro level; there are more theoretical discussions on the analysis of problems and the current situation, but few studies on the lack of urban residents' willingness to express their needs for community public services by combining examples and using first-hand empirical data. Therefore, it is worthwhile to further study why urban community residents make the behavioral choice of not expressing their needs, and how the solution system called for by this problem should be put in place.

## 2. Explanation of the Theoretical Framework of the Study

### 2.1 "Rational Ignorance" in the Expression of Urban Residents' Community Public Service Needs

Rational ignorance refers to the behavior of people who choose not to acquire certain knowledge in the face of the cost and uncertainty of information seeking. In other words, it is rational for people to choose to obtain only certain information and retain ignorance of other information when it is costly to search and they may not be able to obtain all the information and the outcome is uncertain (Anthony Downs, 1997). According to economist Herbert Simon's "limited rationality" model, when people make uncertainty-oriented decisions, it is difficult for them to collect all the favorable information, and their ability to process information is limited by the objective factors of the external environment and their own conditions. At this time, "ignorance" is the expression of rationality, which is a rational compromise or adaptation to the limited information constraints.

Similarly, urban residents experience a similar "rational ignorance" when considering whether to express their needs. That is to say they consciously choose not to or negatively express their true needs for community services. First, based on the "economic man" assumption, urban residents tend not to express their needs. At present, urban communities in China have the problem of fragmented governance resources (Yan Bing, 2021), "information silos" make it costly to search for the full picture of community public services, and the two-way communication channels between residents and relevant departments are obstructed. They will give up their demand for "knowledge" and take the state of "ignorance" as the criterion of "satisfaction"; at the same time, there may be a "free ride" mentality -- Since the cost of expressing my personal needs is so high, I will wait and see if there are residents with the same needs who will take action. At that time, I can reap the expected results without paying the cost.

Second, based on "cost-benefit" considerations, urban residents tend to express themselves negatively. In urban community governance, the power of multiple actors who share the main functions of community governance is mixed and the boundaries are unclear (Li Xiaobo, 2020), the inefficiency of community public service provision results in urban residents' expressions of needs that may not be heard or responded to and improved in a relatively short period of time. The unsatisfactory returns do not compensate for the costs of their time and other resources, and the costs of expression are less than the benefits gained, so naturally individual residents lose the will and motivation to express their needs for community public services.

The psychological motivation of the residents of the decision-making body is complex, both individual rational instincts and the pursuit of collective community service optimization, so the main body of urban community governance needs to take measures to continuously strengthen the dialogue and communication with community residents in order to overcome the innate deficiency of "limited rationality" and crack the innate disorder of "rationality ignorance".

### 2.2 Explanation of Countermeasures Based on the Institutional Levels

Institutions are the stable aggregation of various meanings and strategic structures, containing common goals and conceptual values which presuppose the operating rules of individual actions and group activities. Economist Oliver Williamson divides the institutional hierarchy into four levels: the first level, embedded informal institutions, mainly including social norms and cultural practices; the second level, the basic institutional environment, mainly including formal institutions such as constitutionalism, law and property rights; the third level, governance mechanisms, mainly the governance of contractual relationships, especially the governance structures and arrangements for transactions; and the fourth level, short-term resource allocation and employment relationships (Oliver Williamson, 1985). Among them, the first layer of informal institutions is formed in the process of people's long-term social interaction, which has a very high stability and continuity, and usually has more cohesive, motivating and regulating effects on the collective actions of social groups; the second and third layers are formal institutions, embodied in the formulation of a set of laws or the implementation of policies with a compulsory guarantee. As an implicit alternative governance mechanism, the informal system can help cultivate and optimize the social environment in which the formal system takes root or make up for the shortcomings of the formal system; the ex-ante deterrence and ex-post punishment of the formal system also provide direct institutional guarantee for the role of the informal system (Yang Zhen, Chen Jin, & Ling Hongcheng, 2021).

The institutional hierarchy framework also has good explanatory power for the study of the response to the "rational ignorance" of urban community residents. If there is a great need for a public service in community life, but there are difficulties in the whole mechanism and process of expressing the need, then it is tolerable to put up with it. Therefore, at the most fundamental socio-cultural level, it is imperative to enhance the civic consciousness and rights awareness of our urban residents. Secondly, given the general social phenomenon of

lack of confidence in grassroots democracy, there is a greater need for institutional improvement of democratic consultation mechanisms in urban communities to provide institutional guarantees for realizing effective expression of community residents' needs and access to quality community public services, while further cultivating the concept of subjectivity and the spirit of autonomy. Once again, also needs a more detailed community governance mechanism to give the upper layer of the basic system a practical support so that with high returns on demand expression, community residents will be more willing to express their views, provide suggestions, and even participate in community governance.

The lack of institutions is an important reason for the failure of community governance of public resources. Based on Williamson's institutional hierarchy framework, the relevant policy proposals have a solid theoretical foundation, hoping to give birth to institutional arrangements with distinctive hierarchy and progressiveness to break the "rational ignorance" of urban community residents.

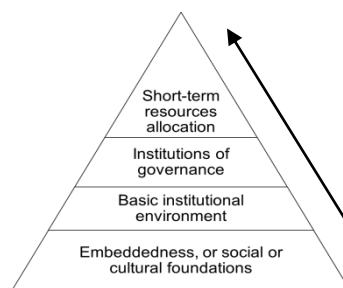


Figure 1. Williamson's 4 institutional hierarchies

### 3. Case Study: Survey on the Expression of Public Service Needs of Urban Community Residents in Dalian City

This study adopts the research method of questionnaire survey, starting from the residents' demand status and satisfaction of community public services, and actively exploring the residents' willingness to express their personal needs on the basis of their satisfaction with community public services. The respondents were Dalian citizens, and the number of valid questionnaires was 237. SPSS19.0 software was used to analyze the data of the valid questionnaires with relevant statistics.

#### 3.1 Analysis of Dalian Citizens' Overall Satisfaction With Community Public Service

Two questions in the questionnaire were selected for descriptive analysis, namely, "Are you satisfied with the following community services" and "Are the following conditions consistent with your current life in the community". The options were assigned values of 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1.

According to Table 1, Dalian people's satisfaction with all the community services in the table is between "average" and "more satisfied", and the mean value of overall satisfaction with community services is 3.66, which is between "average" and "more satisfied". The mean value of overall satisfaction with community services is 3.66, which is between "average" and "more satisfied". This indicates that the current community service situation is generally good, but there are still a small number of residents who are not satisfied with the community service. Therefore, community managers still need to think about how to raise residents' satisfaction to a higher level, instead of just straddling the intermediate stage.

Table 1. Overall satisfaction of community residents with community public services

Satisfaction with community services	Very Dissatisfactio n	Not really satisfied	General	More satisfied	Very satisfied	Average score
Infrastructure	13(5.49%)	7(2.95%)	85(35.86%)	69(29.11%)	63(26.58%)	3.68
Comprehensive Security	12(5.06%)	13(5.49%)	58(24.47%)	84(35.44%)	70(29.54%)	3.79

Environmental Health	10(4.22%)	12(5.06%)	74(31.22%)	71(29.96%)	70(29.54%)	3.76
Culture, Sports and Entertainment	15(6.33%)	19(8.02%)	79(33.33%)	3(26.58%)	61(25.74%)	3.57
Healthcare	12(5.06%)	16(6.75%)	76(32.07%)	70(29.54%)	63(26.58%)	3.66
Property Management	17(7.17%)	22(9.28%)	80(33.76%)	58(24.47%)	60(25.32%)	3.51
Total	79(5.56%)	89(6.26%)	452(31.79%)	415(29.18%)	387(27.22%)	3.66

As can be inferred from Table 2, the satisfaction of Dalian citizens with the quality of community services also ranges from "average" to "relatively satisfied", with a mean score of 3.66, which is in line with the results shown in Table 1. However, through the analysis of the proportion of "dissatisfied" options, the proportion of low scores for "being able to get high-quality services" and "being able to get services that are not different from others" is high, indicating that community residents At the same time, there is a phenomenon of non-equalization of community services in the community, and perhaps for some reasons, the accessibility, quality, type and coverage of community services vary among community residents with different identities, which is worth investigating.

Table 2. Quality level of public services received by community residents

The extent to which the current situation of life in the community is compatible	Fully compliant	Partial	General	Not quite compliant	Does not meet	Average score
Easy access to needed community services	71(29.96%)	56(23.63%)	87(36.71%)	15(6.33%)	8(3.38%)	3.7
Ability to obtain sufficient amount of services	66(27.85%)	60(25.32%)	90(37.97%)	12(5.06%)	9(3.8%)	3.68
Ability to obtain high quality service	62(26.16%)	53(22.36%)	92(38.82%)	17(7.17%)	13(5.49%)	3.57
Access to services that are not different from others	77(32.49%)	45(18.99%)	88(37.13%)	15(6.33%)	12(5.06%)	3.68
Subtotal	276(29.11%)	214(22.57%)	357(37.66%)	59(6.22%)	42(4.43%)	3.66

### 3.2 Analysis of Dalian Citizens' Expressed Needs for Community Public Services

When asked "Have you ever thought of reflecting your needs or problems about community public services to the relevant departments", more than half of the community residents surveyed had not thought of reflecting their problems to the relevant departments, and about 35% had thought about it but did not reflect it. The idea of participating in community governance and improving community services through feedback is low. However, it is also possible that residents are reluctant to give feedback because of the high cost of doing so, or because the feedback is unresolved and weak.

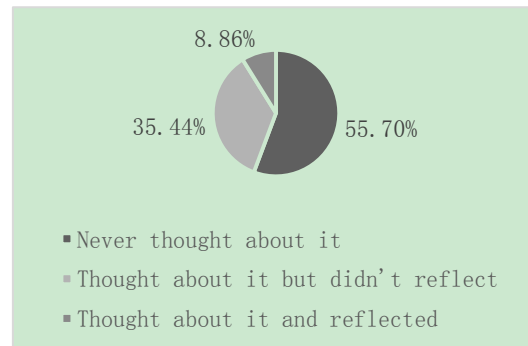


Figure 2. Residents' willingness to express their needs for community public services

If the respondents showed a willingness to express their needs, the questionnaire also went on to ask about their favoured ways to give feedback on issues. As can be seen from Table 3, "through the Internet, telephone or mail to the government," "through people around me who are more enthusiastic about public affairs" and "directly to the street office or community committee" account for relatively high proportion, which community committees and relevant government departments can further improve these feedback channels so that residents can successfully give feedback and eliminate obstacles to seeking help and advice. The rest of the expressions are in the middle and lower reaches of the selected proportion, which indicates that community residents are not yet aware of the importance and necessity of independent participation in the decision-making process of community public services, and that the channels for party members or representatives of the National People's Congress to reflect residents' needs are not open.

Table 3. Ways in which community residents would like to give feedback on issues

Serial number	Options	Number of people (percentage)
1	Reflect to the government through the Internet, telephone or mail	70(66.7%)
2	Go directly to the street office or community council	52(49.52%)
3	Through the people around you who are more enthusiastic about public affairs	39(37.14%)
4	Voting on public service projects organized by the community	37(35.24%)
5	Through the party members around the representatives or the NPC and CPPCC representatives	31(29.52%)
6	Participate in meetings organized by the street community	19(18.1%)
7	Waiting for government or street cadres to come down for research	18(17.14%)

A chi-square test was conducted to correlate the residents' willingness to express their opinions with the above-mentioned selected channels, and it was found that "whether they had thought of reflecting their needs or problems about community public services to the relevant departments" was correlated with their preferred channels of "reflecting their problems" ( $p=0.000<0.05$ ). As shown in Table 4, residents who had "thought about and reflected their problems" tended to choose "Internet, telephone or mail to the government", "going to the street office or community committee", and "going to the government". This means that these channels are effective and convenient; conversely, the other channels that residents tend to choose but do not choose may have some difficulties for residents to reflect their problems.

Table 4. Interactive classification table of community residents' willingness and ways to express their needs (%)

Options	Factors	Whether you want to reflect the problem		P
		Thought about it but didn't reflect	Thought about it and reflected on it	
Reflect to the government through the Internet, telephone or mail	Yes	69.0%	57.1%	0.000
	No	31%	42.9%	
Through the people around you who are more enthusiastic about public affairs	Yes	35.7%	42.9%	0.000
	No	64.3%	57.1%	
Go directly to the street office or community council	Yes	44.0%	71.4%	0.000
	No	56.0%	28.6%	
Voting on public service projects organized by the community	Yes	36.9%	28.6%	0.000
	No	63.1%	71.4%	

On the other hand, the questionnaire also reverses the survey of community visits to residents, 32.49% answered "occasionally", 11.39% answered "never", and 20.68% answered "not sure". 20.68%, indicating that the number of community visits to residents and opinions collection is far from enough, and the understanding of residents' needs is lacking, sensitivity is too low, and attention to public opinion is insufficient.

Figure 3 reflects the community's improvement of community services after receiving feedback and opinions from residents. This shows that the community is still optimizing its services after receiving residents' opinions; however, the highest percentage of "average" indicates that the response to the community's improvement work has not yet reached very good and needs to be improved.

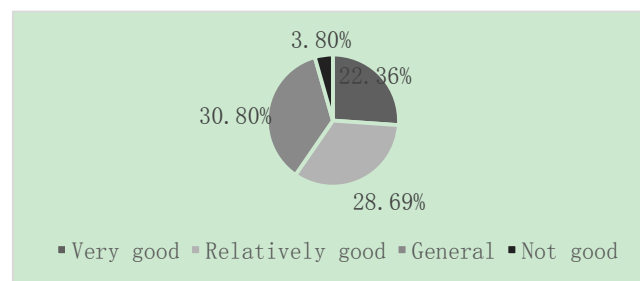


Figure 3. Improvement of community work

### 3.3 Triple Reasons for the Lack of Willingness to Express Public Service Needs of Urban Community Residents

In summary, Dalian citizens are dissatisfied with community public services and their needs are not being met, but most of them choose not to give feedback to the community and never give feedback because they have "accepted" the "top-down" system of community public services. At present, there are some direct and effective ways to improve public services in urban communities, such as online communication or manual handling, but the channels are very limited and there is still room for exploring more robust ways of communication and mutual promotion between the two sides of community public service provision. Communities as public service providers pay relatively little attention to residents' needs and opinions, and the positive improvement efforts returned to residents are slightly mediocre. Based on the analysis of the survey data, the reasons for the lack of willingness of urban community residents to express their needs for public services can be broadly summarized into the following three points.

**Weak civic awareness.** Due to the long-time "top-down" supply system of urban community services in China, community residents have gradually formed a negative adaptive mindset instead of taking the initiative to express their interests to protect their own interests. In addition, based on the objective factors and subjective conditions, without the restraint and support of the civic spirit of "building and sharing together", it is difficult for people to break through the limited rationality and take actions that are consistent with the collective interests.

Expression costs are high. When faced with such unavoidable transaction costs, urban community residents are caught in a game of individual rationality versus collective rationality, and as rational economic people, they choose to be "rationally ignorant" from their personal interests, preferring to give up the opportunity to participate in governance and become "indifferent bystanders", expecting others to show up most of the time and responding occasionally themselves.

Getting a low return. Generally speaking, community residents will make expressed decisions only when the expected benefits outweigh the costs. However, in the current situation where urban communities are responsible for both community affairs and administrative auxiliary, if providers are slow to respond to residents' needs or even ignore them due to work pressure, which will directly affect the cost-benefit of decision makers and reduce the willingness of urban residents to express themselves, when the "rational ignorance effect" occurs.

#### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Using the behavioral hypothesis of "rational ignorance" as the analytical framework, this paper combines the "limited rational person" preference of urban communities in the process of residents' demand expression and the existing shortcomings of urban community governance, and further empirically demonstrates through the questionnaire data of the Dalian community survey, showing that the lack of civic awareness, the high cost of expression and the low returns are the essential reasons for the lack of residents' willingness to express their needs in urban communities, and they are also the endogenous factors influencing the low participation of urban residents in community governance and the poor performance of community public service provision. Based on the above analysis, residents' "rational ignorance" is not an unsolvable "equation". With the help of Williamson's institutional hierarchy framework, this paper changes the perspective and research path, and proposes countermeasures for the lack of willingness of urban residents to express their needs for community public services from different levels of institutional arrangements. The main aspects are as follows.

The socio-cultural aspect of the informal system requires cultivating the civic consciousness of urban community residents and fundamentally fostering their endogenous recognition of the need to express their needs. On the one hand, to awaken the subjectivity of community residents, it is necessary to take the general rules of urban residents' public needs as the basic information in the supply of community public services, to guide residents to fully express their personal needs, to improve their ability to make decisions in the face of uncertainty, to enhance their confidence and internal drive to express their needs, and to achieve "psychological empowerment" (Chen Weidong & Wu Lanbo, 2018); on the other hand, to shape the sense of community, it is necessary to strengthen community education and cultural construction and reform the administrative habits of urban community management. We must stimulate residents' sense of responsibility and strive to cultivate community residents' collective consciousness and public welfare by advocating community public spirit, so that community residents can take the initiative to discover their own community needs together under an invisible "psychological contract" without being "rational and ignorant" bystanders.

Regarding the basic institutional environment for improving the residents' willingness to express their needs, it is important to mention the improvement of the consultative democracy system to ensure the grassroots' substantial participation in community governance and truly become the main subject of governance. First, it is necessary to improve the legal system to solve the problem of the legality of the people's participation in democratic consultation and expression of their needs, to guarantee their status as subjects and to clarify their rights; secondly, we should establish a perfect monitoring system to reduce the improper behaviors such as "free riding" and to protect the interests of the people; thirdly, an accountability system is helpful to hold the participants of democratic consultation accountable for the consequences of their actions, which can appropriately enhance the responsibility of public participation and reduce disorderly expression (Pu Xinwei & Heng Yuanyuan, 2021).

Finally, there are more detailed community governance paths to provide support for the implementation of the basic system at the upper level. Firstly, to address the problem of information asymmetry in the operation of the expression mechanism, urban communities are encouraged to use information technology as a governance tool, build an intelligent participation platform for public service information, construct an information database for various public services in the community, and break the "information silos". Secondly, to address the problem of limited and poor channels of expression, diversified paths of demand expression are more adaptable, combining direct and indirect paths to avoid the paradox of public choice (Zhang Qing, 2017), while also aiming to cultivate other robust power paths such as party building and leading, and hybridization to varying degrees. In addition, to address the problem of low responsiveness of relevant departments, the government can accordingly set out a list of powers and responsibilities, clarify the division of responsibilities and feedback time frames of each responsible department, and incorporate the content of handling the public service needs of community residents into the performance assessment system to urge them to improve the efficiency of their actions; or introduce diversified public service providers and use a non-stop competition mechanism to filter out "those who are in



their positions but not in their administration", through which the quality of community public services can be improved.

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