

On the School Adaptation Dilemma of Impoverished College Students under the Field Theory

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Abstract: The university stage is a critical period for students to transition from campus to society. Whether poor college students can successfully achieve school adaptation is not only related to their personal development and educational returns to families, but also has important implications for social talent supply and the national work of poverty alleviation and preventing poverty reversion. By combing relevant literatures and integrating the field theory, this paper deeply discusses the school adaptation problem of poor college students, analyzes the current situation, influencing factors, and action mechanisms they face in the adaptation process, points out the multi-dimensional dilemmas in learning, emotion, campus life, and interpersonal adaptation, and proposes the content that future research should further expand to facilitate the growth of poor college students and maintain social fairness.

Keywords: School adaptation; Impoverished college students; Field theory

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1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening up, China's social and economic structure has undergone a major transformation, which has had a significant impact on individuals' educational paths and family education. A series of educational problems have also emerged, such as the continuous increase in the number of migrant children ^[1]. Education is an important way for class advancement, but now it has instead become a booster for class solidification. Examinations themselves are fair, but education, resources, social classes, etc., are not so fair. The deep-seated problems behind them involve social fairness, resource allocation, class solidification, etc. Moreover, even if poor students overcome limitations, pass the college entrance examination, and enter the field of higher education, they will still face the major difficulty of school adaptation ^[2-3]. The school adaptation problem of poor students in colleges and universities is not only related to their personal academic achievements, mental health, and future development, but also closely linked to their families' educational expectations, social resource allocation, and the country's education policies. A good school adaptation process can help poor students better integrate into

college life, enhance their self-efficacy, realize their personal value, and thus bring hope to their families and cultivate useful talents for society. Conversely, it may lead to their setbacks in academics, the generation of negative emotions such as inferiority and anxiety in their psychology, and even their disadvantaged position in future employment and social life, thus affecting the stability and harmonious development of society. But at the same time, some research has also found that poor students have unique adaptation advantages^[4]. This requires us to systematically sort out and analyze the existing research results to understand the school adaptation of poor students in colleges and universities more comprehensively and deeply.

2. Literature review

School adaptation is a multi-dimensional concept, covering aspects such as learning adaptation, emotional adaptation, campus life adaptation, and interpersonal adaptation. Its connotation can be summarized into three orientations: process-oriented, result-oriented, and an orientation that combines both process and result. The process-oriented approach emphasizes the dynamic nature of adaptation. Many scholars, etc., believe that school adaptation is a dynamic process in which students attempt to adapt to the requirements of the school environment, including students' in-school performance, emotions, and attitudes towards school^[5-7]. The result-oriented approach, represented by Ladd and Birch, focuses on students' overt behavioral manifestations and attitudes towards school^[8-9]. Scholars at home and abroad have also studied school adaptation from different dimensions, such as learning adaptation, life adaptation, and social adaptation^[10-11].

In terms of the influencing factors of school adaptation, the research found that both internal and external factors affect students' adaptation. It has an impact on one's ability. Internal factors include types of motivation, self-efficacy, etc., while external factors cover family environment, parental rearing styles, etc.^[12-13]. For example, the intimacy and communication frequency in the family environment are positively correlated with students' school adaptation ability^[14]. Regarding parental rearing styles, some scholars have found through the Parental Rearing Style Questionnaire and the College Student Adaptation Questionnaire that there is a close relationship between students' parental rearing styles and school adaptation^[15]; Wang Yansong et al. found that a close, supportive, and non-conflictual teacher-student relationship is conducive to encouraging students to actively participate in class and maintain their learning interest^[16]; An Qin and Li Xushan found that social support plays a mediating role in the relationship between family function and the school adaptation of freshmen in college^[17].

In terms of research methods, current research methods on school adaptation mainly adopt the form of questionnaires, such as the MMPI-2 College Maladjustment Scale, the Chinese College Students Adaptation Scale (CCSAS), the Beck Depression Inventory, the Self-Control Scale (SCS), the Revised NEO Personality Inventory-Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), etc.^[18-21]. In addition, qualitative research methods such as the interview method have also been applied to explore the adaptation status of students. As for relevant qualitative research, the interview method is mainly used to explore the adaptation status of college students in aspects such as learning, life, psychology, interpersonal relationships, emotional world, and career choices^[22]. Besides, some scholars have adopted a combination of questionnaires and interviews^[23].

As a special group, impoverished students in colleges and universities have unique and complex problems in school adaptation. Research has found that impoverished students face adaptation difficulties in terms of mental health levels and financial aid situations. Xu Fuming et al. pointed out that poverty reduces people's subjective well-being^[24]. Wei Rong et al. found that poor college students have a disadvantaged mentality and have adverse

characteristics in cognition, emotion, etc.^[25]. However, existing research mainly focuses on aspects such as mental health levels, with few studies taking school adaptation as the main research object and lacking a discriminative discussion of different domain dimensions of school adaptation.

The school adaptation of poor students in colleges and universities not only concerns their personal growth, but also has a predictive effect on their future social adaptation and development. Ernst et al. found that an individual's experience of poverty may affect their investment in long-term returns such as education and health, and thus affect their ability to cope with future life risks^[26]. In addition, poor college students also demonstrate unique advantages in the process of their school learning and development. For example, Long Xingyue found that poor freshmen in college have a relatively strong ability to adapt to the environment, which may be related to their low requirements for life and high tolerance^[27].

Literature review reveals gaps in current research on poor college students' school adaptation: scarce studies on "cross-field adaptation" from secondary to university, overreliance on single-discipline theories (pedagogy/psychology) lacking multidimensional analysis, and dominance of quantitative methods that hinder in-depth exploration of adaptation challenges. Thus, this study employs field theory to integrate internal (habitus) and external (capital) factors for a comprehensive analysis.

3. Discussion on the concept of "School adaptation"

As one of the core concepts in the fields of education and psychology, school adaptation has rich and multi-dimensional connotations. Different scholars have defined school adaptation from different perspectives, and the previous text has also made some arrangements. Based on the above viewpoints, this study believes that school adaptation is a process in which students, in different campus situations or tasks, in order to maintain the harmonious and stable state of their internal and external selves, based on their own development needs, make dynamic adjustments in the ever-changing campus activities, and ultimately promote the all-round development of individuals. This definition not only covers the dynamics and results of school adaptation but also highlights the subjectivity and initiative of students in the adaptation process, providing a solid theoretical foundation for in-depth research on the school adaptation problems of poor students in colleges and universities.

4. Analysis of school adaptation issues for impoverished college students based on field theory

The field theory is one of the core ideas in the sociological theory system. Pierre Bourdieu proposed the field theory in the 1950s^[28]. He adopted Marxist philosophy, Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, Sartre's view of praxis, etc., and believed that actors determine their social positions in a specific social relationship network. Relying on their specific capital and habitus, they live in a certain social field and at the same time create and construct themselves and the society they live in^[29]. This provides a unique and powerful analytical framework for in-depth analysis of the school adaptation problems of poor students in colleges and universities (**Figure 1**).

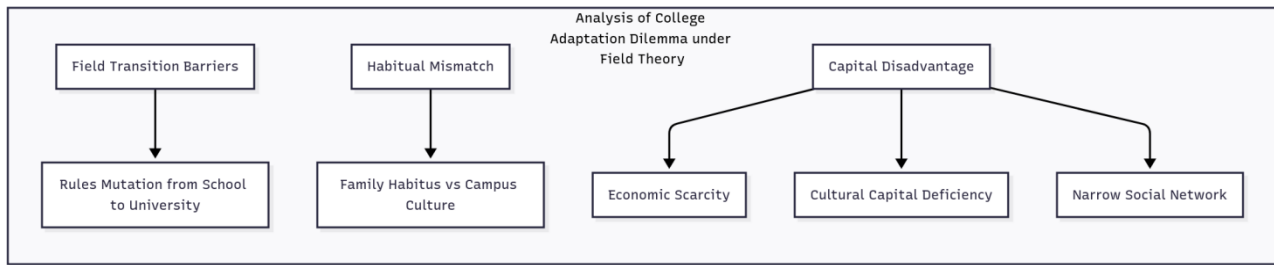


Figure 1. Analysis of the college adaptation dilemma under field theory

4.1. Field

A field refers to a structured social space formed around specific theories and practices, in which different actors and organizations compete with each other for resources, power, and legitimacy. Each field has its unique rules, logics, and conventions. These rules and logics shape the behavior patterns and cognitive models of individuals within the field, and have a profound impact on the distribution of resources and the operation of power.

In the field of education, the transition from primary and secondary schools to universities constitutes a significant field transformation. Although the fields of primary and secondary schools and universities both belong to the education system, there are many differences between them in terms of rules, culture, and evaluation criteria. The field of primary and secondary schools usually places more emphasis on the single evaluation criterion of academic performance, highlighting the imparting and memorization of knowledge. In contrast, the university field is more diverse and complex. Besides academic requirements, it also attaches importance to the development of students' comprehensive qualities, innovative abilities, practical abilities in society, and interpersonal skills, among other aspects.

4.2. Habitus

Habitus is a lasting dispositional tendency and behavioral pattern formed by an individual during the long-term socialization process. It is deeply rooted in the individual's mind and body, influencing the individual's perception, judgment, and response to external stimuli. Habitus has relative stability and continuity. It is continuously strengthened and reproduced in the interaction between the individual and the social environment, and at the same time, it also restricts the individual's choices and actions to a certain extent.

Before entering the university field, poor students have formed specific habitus in their family and social environments, deeply rooted in family culture, regional culture, and class background. For example, the diligence and frugality emphasized in some poor families may endow students with resilience with difficulties. However, limited educational resources and cultural edification in poor families often lead to insufficient understanding of higher education culture, causing their habitus to conflict with university mainstream norms and affect school adaptation.

4.3. Capital

In field theory, capital is a key tool for social power and resource competition, featuring accumulateness, competitiveness, and transmissibility. Bourdieu classifies it into three forms:

Economic capital: Encompasses wealth and material resources. Poor students face shortages, hindering access to learning materials, training, and social practices, thus affecting academic performance.

Cultural capital: Includes knowledge, skills, and cultural literacy. Impoverished students often lack cultural capital, struggling to engage in academic lectures or campus activities due to insufficient exposure to high culture.

Social capital: Refers to resources from social networks (e.g., teacher-student bonds, peer relationships). Limited by family backgrounds, poor students have narrower networks, facing challenges in building new connections—such as hesitation to socialize due to inferiority or interpersonal setbacks from limited skills.

4.4. The interaction mechanism among field, habitus, and capital

The field shapes and filters individual habitus through its rules and culture: compatible habitus gain field support for adaptation, while incompatible ones hinder it. Capital accumulation/utilization, as a field competitive tool, is influenced by habitus: positive habits (e.g., diligence) enable effective capital use (e.g., work-study to improve conditions), whereas negative habits (e.g., inferiority) lead to capital accumulation failure, worsening marginalization. For instance, some poor students leverage frugality to plan expenses and build capital, while others evade opportunities due to withdrawal, worsening adaptation.

In summary, the university field, habitus, and capital interweave to form a complex mechanism affecting poor students' school adaptation. Field transition requires them to adjust their habitus and accumulate capital, but family and social constraints often leave them at a disadvantage, leading to adaptation challenges. Understanding this mechanism helps design targeted interventions for their college adjustment and growth.

5. Summary and prospect

Based on the analysis of field theory and literature review, the complexity and diversity of the school adaptation problems of impoverished students in colleges and universities can be summarized. The transformation of the field requires impoverished students to adjust their habits and accumulate capital, but their family backgrounds limit them and make them face many challenges. To address this issue, future research should be carried out in three aspects: expanding research content, deepening theoretical construction, and strengthening the transformation of practical applications.

Future research should focus on the adaptation characteristics and causal mechanisms of impoverished students from different regions, genders, and disciplinary backgrounds, while deeply exploring the psychological and social factors in the adaptation process. It is also necessary to further deepen theoretical construction by integrating field theory with cultural capital theory, resilience theory, etc., to construct a more explanatory theoretical framework—for example, combining resilience theory to study the internal psychological mechanisms and coping strategies of poor students in the face of adversity. In terms of practical application, research results should be transformed into educational policy recommendations to promote the fair distribution of educational resources, so as to provide more effective support and assistance for poor college students and help them achieve personal value and social fairness.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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