

A Study on the Collective Anxiety of Upward Mobility Among “Small-Town Swots” Based on the Perspective of the Sociology of Education Theory

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Abstract: Education has always been the pursuit of many for “knowledge changes destiny,” and it has become an important way for disadvantaged students to achieve upward social mobility. However, when children from lower-middle-class cities or rural areas enter elite universities, they often feel like they are lagging behind other students. The aura of elite universities and the bleak reality causes anxiety among “small-town swots.” This article finds that the collective anxiety of upward mobility among “small-town swots” involves three aspects: academic anxiety, employment anxiety, and ability anxiety. According to the sociology of education theory, this anxiety is caused by the frustration experienced during the process of field transformation and the lack of competition for inherent advantages.

Keywords: “Small-town swot”; Upward mobility; Sociology of education

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1. Introduction

“Small-town swots” refer to students from rural areas or relatively smaller cities with lower economic development levels. Who rely on swotting up to get into first-class universities. However, they become invisible risk students during college and often face unemployment issues upon graduation^[1]. There are countless small towns in China, so “small-town swots” refers to a group that occupies a large proportion of the entire social class. It can be said that the fate of being a “small-town swot” outlines the most common path of life for Chinese youth. While this resonance provides a temporary relief akin to “seeking comfort in a group,” if it persists over the long term, it is bound to create a negative and stifling atmosphere, causing sustained and repetitive destructive effects on the societal mindset.

Based on the concerns of the “small-town swots” and the social problems behind them, a study was conducted on the upward mobility anxiety of “small-town swots” under the theory of sociology of education.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Research on higher education and social mobility

The upward mobility of “small-town swots” reflects the deeper issue of whether higher education can promote individual upward mobility. Based on relevant literature, there are three main views on this problem.

The first standpoint advocates for promotion. Wu ^[2] believes that higher education, as an important social mobility mechanism for social members, promotes individual upward mobility. Zhao and Wang ^[3] found through empirical research that those who have received higher education have a greater probability of upward mobility than those who have not, and this increases the opportunities for upward mobility for disadvantaged groups.

The second emphasizes hindrance^[4] believes that in the context of scale expansion, higher education hinders social mobility, and the “Matthew Effect” in employment puts children of lower social classes in a dire situation. Zhao and Feng ^[5] found that there is a strong intergenerational transmission of education in China. It is difficult for the lower class to achieve upward social mobility through education. In contrast, the upper class can easily stay in the upper class, reflecting the social trend of class solidification.

The third supports a conditional perspective. Zhang and Jia ^[6] believe that higher education can realize social mobility with certain prerequisites: an open society with interconnected classes. This social order can realize the value of higher education and allows the creation of a value system that is recognized by all classes. Wu *et al.* ^[7] believe that only when higher education opportunities are equally distributed among all social classes, the balance of supply and demand for college students is maintained, and social mobility is based on self-achieved, can the disadvantaged classes achieve upward social mobility.

2.2. Bourdieu’s sociology of education theory

Pierre Bourdieu conducted a systematic study on the educational system. “Field,” “habitus,” and “capital” are the three core concepts that run through Bourdieu’s sociology of education theory ^[8].

Bourdieu believes that the field is the external social reality of an individual that shapes his/her behavior. Once an individual enters the field, they must act according to the rules of the field ^[9]. The education system is a “field” in the entire social system. The structure and characteristics of different educational fields will have different impacts on students’ learning and development. Students need to adapt to and interact with different fields constantly.

Bourdieu also proposed the concept of “habitus,” which is a preconscious concept ^[10]. Habitus also regulate an individual’s behavior in the field. Habitus that comply with the rules of the field will result in competitive advantages, otherwise they will be an obstacle. Students will form various habits during their journey of learning. Some habits may be beneficial, while others may be counterproductive.

In Bourdieu’s view, each of us is constrained by the social, economic, and cultural capital of our class. Each person has their place in a social space and do their best. This shows that class status does not constitute a person’s identity. Rather, it depends more on the “capital” that individuals obtain through social relationships. Different groups and individuals have different amounts of capital in education, thus affecting the opportunities to obtain educational resources and the possibility of success ^[11].

The inequity of social mobility and its causes have always been one of the themes of Bourdieu’s sociological research. In a sense, the sociology of education theory is an extrapolation of this theme. The relationship between these three major concepts makes this theory provide a unique theoretical framework for the study of the collective anxiety about upward mobility among “small-town swots.”

3. The specific manifestations of the upward mobility anxiety of “small-town swots”

3.1. Academic anxiety: Grades being of utmost importance

A high GPA in college or university is the primary condition for one to pursue postgraduate studies. As a result, many students find themselves caught up in a competitive frenzy, striving for the limited spots available for postgraduate studies. The “small-town swots” who are “habitually excellent,” continue to be as hardworking as they had been in high school in their university studies. They are sensitive to rankings and regard grades as the standard for evaluating individual excellence. Consequently, they will not allow their grades to drop and are used to being excellent students. They are afraid of failing their exams and will often beat themselves up when their grades are unsatisfactory.

3.2. Ability anxiety: “985 waste”

“Small-town swots” tend to downplay their abilities because they lack confidence and are unable to express themselves freely. When some students see their classmates proudly talking about their achievements, they cannot help but feel envious. They know that focusing only on exams does not prepare them with the comprehensive qualities and practical abilities required by the complex society. Moreover, the overall test scores every school year will also cause immense anxiety among the “small-town swots,” as bad grades indicate incompetence.

3.3. Employment anxiety: The long gown that cannot be taken off

The competition in the job market is fierce, and negative news, such as the difficulty of finding a job among college students, constantly impacts the career choice and employment concepts of “small-town swots.” This employment anxiety shows up in a few ways: Firstly, there is a lack of confidence in finding a job, worrying about smoothly transitioning into employment, and fearing the possibility of being a “NEET” (not in employment, education, or training). Secondly, there is a struggle with the stark contrast between high career expectations and the often low reality. This mismatch can lead to anxiety, especially the fear that others might mock them for not earning as much as they thought their hard work in studying would bring. Lastly, there is a decrease in self-confidence and concern about falling behind their peers. If there is a noticeable gap between an individual and their peers with less education, this psychological difference can grow, creating more negative feelings.

4. Causes of upward mobility collective anxiety among “small-town swots”

4.1. Frustration in field conversion

4.1.1. Middle school → College: The old study habits do not work well

Most students have developed passive learning habits under the strict and authoritative education management in high schools. However, in college-level studies, students are required to seek knowledge and resources actively and conduct academic research and competition preparations more independently. As “small-town swots” are very dependent on the teacher and required to adhere to the rigid arrangements of the school during the middle-school stage, they do not develop good self-study habits and information-gathering abilities. The exam-oriented skills they acquire in middle school might not help them adapt to college life. This then limits their academic development opportunities. Long-term passive learning has resulted in “small-town swots” not taking the initiative to communicate with teachers. Therefore, they often lag behind others in scientific research during the university stage.

4.1.2. College → Workplace: The mismatch between university education and the job market

Although Chinese colleges and universities currently offer courses on innovation skills cultivation and employment guidance, these courses are often created for the sake of formalities. This can be reflected in the teaching methods of these courses. Courses that are supposed to develop innovation skills and provide career guidance are often taught using textbooks. Since the course content has nothing to do with the major, students often neglect these kinds of courses. Consequently, they lack awareness of career planning and innovation skills, which potentially affects their future development. On the other hand, the content of university education is not in line with the needs of the working world. University education often emphasizes theory over practical skills. However, many jobs require high-quality talents with interdisciplinary knowledge and practical capabilities. Therefore, “small-town swots” often struggle when they are faced with career challenges.

4.2. The shortcomings of pre-endowed capital

Living in a small town constrains the three types of resources that “small-town swots” can tap into. It also highlights the harsh social reality they encounter, where intergenerational mobility poses a challenging dilemma resembling a “replication-style” transmission ^[12].

4.2.1. Insufficient economic capital leads to psychological imbalance

Although it is impossible to generalize all “small-town swots” as poor, most of the “small-town swots” often come from lower-class families. Although “small-town swots” still believe that hard work is the way to success, they also believe that “the descendants of the rich will be rich, and the descendants of the poor will remain poor.” Therefore, they begin to lose hope. Some scholars pointed out that the current phenomenon of class solidification of youths is manifested in three aspects: the “hereditization” system of the upper-class youth, the “degeneration” of the middle-class youth, and the “marginalization of the bottom-class youth” ^[14]. The solidification of identity through intergenerational transmission brought about by the solidification of social classes has caused considerable resistance to the upward mobility of youths today and has invisibly cast a thick shadow on the hearts of “small-town swots.”

4.2.2. Insufficient social capital leads to unequal opportunities

(1) Employment inequality

The Chinese society emphasizes human relationships and social relations. The connections and social standing inherited from the previous generation continue to be influential in shaping the prospects of the next generation. These factors serve as a kind of personal influence during the job-seeking process. For those from “small-town” backgrounds, despite holding prestigious degrees from top-notch universities, uncertainty about the future arises due to a lack of influential connections. They face heightened pressure, as the advantages built upon the social resources of more privileged groups become more challenging to attain.

(2) Information gap

College is like an unknown journey where students must constantly explore, grow, and adapt. In this journey, all students seem to start from the same starting point, but in fact, they are very different. There are mainly two types of students: The first type is the “information rich” type from the upper class. They hold a map of their journey, clearly understand all the rules, and have clear goals. This map comes from the rich social resources of their parents, helping them to win in the fierce competition. The other type is the “information poor” type represented by the “small-town swots.” No one tells them the university’s rules, and they must explore every choice. Therefore, due to their limited information

resources, their college life and the job market become uncertain, requiring more trial and error.

4.2.3. Insufficient cultural capital leads to quality differences

Economic and cultural capital are interrelated, and the gap in cultural capital is directly reflected in the education funds. Middle-class elite families are keen on educational consumption. While ensuring their children's cultural achievements, they also focus on cultivating arts, interpersonal, and leadership skills. To a certain extent, their upbringing methods allow their children to acquire the cultural habits of the elite class. In contrast, the "small-town swots" have only been exposed to textbooks since childhood, so when they grow up, they have no hobbies of their own, nor do they know how to socialize or solve real-life problems. Therefore, when they begin their university lives, they are often rejected by the societies and clubs of the university due to their lack of skills. In the end, "small-town swots" are isolated from other students, making them unable to adapt to the culture of elite universities, and cultural discomfort ensues.

5. Conclusion

The identification with the label "small-town swot" is powerful and resonant because it carries high expectations for social mobility and a strong desire, whether explicit or implicit, to bring about change in both oneself and the world. While the current circumstances may present challenges for a "small-town swot" to kickstart their journey, life is a marathon, and premature judgments about future development are unwarranted. Being labeled a "small-town swot" today does not dictate a lifelong identity. With continued focus, hard work, and dedication to self-improvement, there is a chance to surpass others.

Although small-town swots will encounter some challenges in the process of upward mobility, it is undeniable that studying is a relatively fair way to change one's destiny. The college entrance examination remains a chance for individuals to access higher education independently, irrespective of family support or social background. Consequently, it is crucial for society to continue focusing on and enhancing the education system to ensure that more students can fully benefit from increased education opportunities and achieve a more comprehensive personal development.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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