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How does success culture influence class inequality among young people

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Abstract. Rising competition and peer involution among young people may have fostered the prevalence of success culture, which takes individual hard-work and material conditions as key criteria to measure success. This article investigates how the individualistic merit-oriented narratives rooted in success culture shape class inequality among young people aged 18 to 35. It explains how the hidden curriculum in schools and upward social comparison triggered by social media contribute to young people's internalisation of merit-oriented values. Furthermore, built upon Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and Illouz's therapeutic-discourse perspective, this analysis based literature explores the intergenerational transmission of economic, cultural and social resources, as well as the process of how cultural narratives psychologise class disadvantages at the individual level. The analysis suggests that success culture tends to attribute personal success and failure to individual endeavour alone, thereby concealing structural barriers faced by young people from underprivileged backgrounds. Nevertheless, effects of social reproduction are not predetermined. Young people are active interpretive subjects, and their material conditions constrain the degree to which they accept or resist dominant meritocratic narratives. This study suggests that exclusive focus on unequal material opportunities cannot fully explain class disparities among young people, but individual mindsets also deserve sufficient attention. Future research can adopt primary interviews or longitudinal studies to track shifts in young people's perceptions and unpack local characteristics of East-Asian success culture.

Keywords: success culture, class inequality, young people, meritocracy, social reproduction

1. Introduction

Rising competitive pressure among young people contributes to the growing attention to success culture. In a 2023 WeChat-recruited survey by People's Think-Tank, 63.22% of respondents aged 19-25 and 62.24% of respondents aged 26-30 reported high levels of self-perceived involution[1]. This non-probabilistic sample cannot represent the full population of Chinese youth. In this case, the success culture includes conventional inspirational content, monetization and get-rich-quick courses, personal rags-to-riches methodologies,

[1] People's Think-Tank. (2023, October 17). Survey report on Chinese youth's competitive mental state [Web page]. Rmlt.com.cn. https://www.rmlt.com.cn/2023/1017/685284.shtml

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financial literacy crash courses and online influencer growth tutorials, and it refers to the mainstream utilitarian pursuit, regarding social wealth and status as the primary criteria for defining success. Apparently, this cultural tendency is likely to profoundly influence the class reproduction and stratification, hence making it vital to identify the link between success culture and class inequality. So far, existing research has primarily linked success culture with particular social phenomena or social media, such as domestic involution, short-video platforms and self-media, as well as internal psychological mechanism. These studies concentrate on how success values are disseminated and instilled among adolescents from the micro perspective. This article focuses specifically on how success-oriented narratives relate to class inequality among young people. There are some outstanding problems about how success culture affects resource allocation, class identification and opportunity structures across different social strata among young people. Consequently, this article aims to systematically analyze how universal success culture influences class inequality in young people aged 18 to 35, and argue success culture reinforces class inequality by presenting success due to individual effort, while obscuring unequal access to economic, cultural and social resources.

2. Literature review

The conceptual connotation of success culture has undergone three major shifts in the past. At the beginning, Weber traced the cultural origins of success-oriented values to the Protestant ethics [1]. Through a core transformation of the understanding of the Calling, labour carried sacred moral attributes, so Protestantism created the striving spirit of career pursuit. Also, Asceticism encouraged the spirit of wealth accumulation, fostering a mindset of disciplined wealth accumulation, which offers one historical account linking religious ethics to disciplined economic striving. The second shift of success culture was bound up with the advancement of Meritocracy. In Young's The Rise of Meritocracy, Young popularised the term "meritocracy" through a dystopian satire [2]. It refers to a system where social power, wealth and status are fully allocated based on Intelligence Quotient plus Effort, replacing the traditional hereditary aristocracy. Sandel observes that secular ideals of individual talent and effort gained greater cultural prominence, and personal achievements came to be explained by talent and hard work [3]. This shift gradually crystallized into a modern meritocratic culture, so a broadly defined success culture began to take shape. The turn of 21st century could be viewed as the third shift of the success culture. Drawing on Illouz, this paper considers how therapeutic psychological language has become intertwined with popular discourses of personal success [4]. So the discourse of the success culture systematically appropriates psychological concepts to interpret and reframe individual achievements and setbacks, steering the success culture toward individualistic narratives. Then Littler argues that meritocratic norms may produce persistent self-evaluative anxiety, and suggests self-improvement industries can feed upon such anxieties [5]. These products including courses, books and counseling are marketed as tools for enhancing effort and talent. Overall, the historical development of the success culture demonstrates a gradual shift from religious morality to individual achievement.

This gives rise to an important social problem: If success is interpreted merely as the outcome of individual endeavor, how can people recognize unequal social conditions and class privileges? Therefore, we need to examine the theory of social reproduction and the problem of unequal access to resources. Social reproduction was suggested by Bourdieu, which provides a useful framework for understanding the process through which existing class structures, inequalities and power relationships are sustained and passed down among generations [6]. Family can transmit economic, cultural and social resources across generations, while institutions such as schools may recognize and reward particular forms of cultural capital, reproducing the original social hierarchy. Bourdieu also has systematically elaborated these three forms of capital. Economic

capital consists of financial, material and tangible assets and resources that can be directly converted into money, legally secured as property rights, like income, property and savings. Children from affluent households may benefit from resources that can reduce certain developmental and financial barriers. Family can provide children with superior living conditions, like elite education, thereby they face little financial stress and are not required to get employment at an early age. For cultural capital, it can exist in the embodied, objectified and institutionalized states, involving dispositions, cultural knowledge, and educational qualifications. Privileged families cultivate cultural tastes that align with school standards and elite norms. Thus, children in higher class tend to achieve better academic results and obtain qualifications as educational assessment favors such cultural capital. Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources accessible through social networks and group membership. Mutual acquaintance and recognition within these relationships enable individuals to obtain information and opportunities. So people embedded in elite networks have greater access to high-quality employment or education. In summary, the uneven distribution of three forms of capital generates long-standing class inequality. People from disadvantaged class, by contrast, lack sufficient economic resources, dominant cultural dispositions and influential social connections. Without such capital, they will face more obstacles in schools and workplaces. In modern society, the individualistic narrative of success culture obscures these structural barriers, and attributes the causes of success and failure solely to individuals. Such narratives may obscure structural class disadvantages and unequal opportunity structures, potentially legitimising existing class divisions rather than mechanically reproducing them.

Additionally, attitudes toward success and achievement are not formed in isolation, but are transmitted and reinforced by everyday agents of socialization. Schools act as agencies of secondary socialization through education system internalizing meritocratic ideas of success into students. Because schools continuously intensify the assumption of success culture through the set of unwritten, unofficial norms, values, expectations and behaviors, known as Hidden Curriculum, Bowles & Gintis argue that social relations within schooling may mirror workplace hierarchies [7]. This theoretical framework suggests how school hidden curricula could legitimise unequal outcomes, whereas poor academic performance is more likely to be interpreted as lack of ambition and diligence. So students gradually learn to view academic achievement as a marker of individual worth, hence internalizing a merit-oriented belief that good grades count as success and embracing dominant narratives of success culture. Although school socialization makes a critical contribution to young people's internalization of success-culture ideals, social media create a new space where these meritocratic narratives are further disseminated and reshaped in postmodern society. Gerbner outlines a cultivation framework describing how sustained television viewing can shape perceptions of social reality [8]. Extending this logic to social-media success content requires further empirical evidence. Applied to contemporary social media, this theory suggests that repeated exposure to meritocracy-related contents such as wealth, status and personal success may influence young people's perceptions of what constitutes personal desirable success. Furthermore, Vogel et al. found upward social comparison on social media correlated with lower self-esteem, with experimental evidence for short-term shifts in self-evaluation [9]. These findings document psychological effects of social-media comparison but do not confirm the long-term internalisation of meritocratic belief systems among young people.

3. Discussion

This section discusses how meritocratic narratives shape perceptions of inequality specifically among young people. Existing research has explored class reproduction in family, education and work, well, research focus on how popular success culture shapes young people's subjective beliefs about their own success

opportunities. Bourdieu's social reproduction theory explains how three forms of capital are passed down within family, and it elaborates objective resources that young people can inherit. Illouz's concept of the psychologisation thus fills the gap in Bourdieu's structural model. Applied to success culture, it explains why young people might interpret individual failure as a personal psychological weakness rather than class disadvantage. Combined Bourdieu's focus on material conditions with Illouz's emphasis on cultural narratives, it offers a dual lens for youth experiences. Material structures dictate the boundaries of their life chances, but success culture operates within these boundaries, justifying and masking class inequality.

The literature reviewed above suggests that success culture can rationalize class inequality among youth. Without changes in their material circumstances, repeated exposure to such cultural content may encourage some individuals to interpret personal setbacks as individual psychological failings, passively internalizing meritocratic explanations of the class inequality in their minds. However, this interpretation risks treating young people as passive recipients of success culture, pointing out that young people's class background forms the foundation of their worldview, and success culture does not shape cognition alone. They are active subjects to interpret information, and their material circumstances shape which elements of success-culture narratives they accept or reject, achieving individual agency. For example, it is possible that working-class or disadvantaged young people may endorse the motivation of hard work, it is possible that working-class young people may value the ideal of hard work while still perceiving structural barriers to advancement. This remains a hypothetical observation requiring primary data, so they refuse to fully internalize the issue of inequality. Therefore, material conditions limit the extent to which success culture can alter youth's perceptions of inequality. If youth possess agency and can resist or selectively interpret success culture narratives, the capacity of success culture to reproduce class inequality is not fixed, and the scope of this agency is constrained by their material resources. However, even with this resistance, mainstream success culture still benefits advantaged young groups, as they have adequate three types of capital. So they are better equipped to meet the idealized standards of being a successful person. Consequently, the process by which success culture reproduces class inequality should not be understood as automatic or uniform, but it can be shaped by interactions between cultural narratives, individual agency, and social conditions.

Although Bourdieu's and Illouz's theories are useful for this project, both have have limitations when applied to contemporary young people. Bourdieu's idea of social reproduction may be overly static. For young people, it carries a risk of overemphasising structural constraint and underestimating possibilities for social mobility among young adults, thereby underestimating their potential for social mobility. Furthermore, this theoretical framework was suggested before the popularity of digital media. Contemporary young people heavily undergo secondary socialization through social media, which is a digital space that Bourdieu could not anticipate. As for Illouz's theory of therapeutic success culture, it is powerful yet Western-centered. The critique of cultural contingency reveals the Western-centrism of therapeutic success narratives. It should be noted that Illouz's analysis draws on Western contexts, and its assumptions may not directly transfer to East-Asian youth without additional local empirical support. The emphasis on commercialized self-help narratives is likely to psychologize class inequality, overlooking the distinct structural pressure of education competition in East Asia. Thus, local form of success culture differs from its Western version. This means this theoretical framework used in this analysis may lack full applicability to the youth population examined in this project.

Nevertheless, this discussion has inherent weaknesses in the existing evidence base used to examine young people's attitudes. This project relies exclusively on secondary literature. Although it is valuable for theoretical synthesis, it lacks the depth of primary empirical data. Furthermore, there is limited research tracking how long-term engagement with success-culture content reshapes young people's beliefs about inequality, and

existing research predominantly provides correlational evidence regarding success culture and youth attitudes, falling short of establishing definitive causation. This raises the problem of endogeneity: whether exposure to success culture alters youth perception of class, or whether young people with class anxiety actively gravitate towards specific success culture, remains unclear.

4. Conclusions

This article aims to analyze how success culture influences class inequality among young people aged 18-35. Overall, the analysis indicates that success culture reinforces class inequality primarily through its individualistic meritocratic narratives. By attributing success and failure to individual endeavors, it may obscure the unequal distribution of cultural, economic and social capital, which form substantial structural barriers for disadvantaged young people. However, this reproduction of class division is not an automatic process. Young people are active agents of cultural transmission, so they can determine the means of how to interpret, and the extent to which accept or resist meritocratic ideas. This influences the power of success culture to reshape young people's worldviews. This article combines Bourdieu's social reproduction theory and Illouz's account of therapeutic discourse to understand youth experiences of inequality. Bourdieu explains the objective intergenerational transmission of resources, while Illouz illustrates how structural flaw is reframed as individual psychological weakness in mainstream culture. Even so, Bourdieu's construction may be considered to be overly static, and Illouz's theory carries limitations rooted in its cultural contingency. In conclusion, these analysis have practical social implications. Survey evidence captures young Chinese respondents' subjective feelings of involution[2], yet such data cannot establish causal links between success-culture narratives and subjective distress, the popular emphasis on self-improvement and individual mental adjustment may shift public attention away from resource gaps. To understand youth inequality, it is not enough to merely focus on individual mindsets, but unequal material opportunities also deserve recognition. Therefore, future research could conduct primary interviews or longitudinal studies to trace dynamic changes in young people's attitudes, and further explore the locally specific features of East-Asian success culture.

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