

The Academic Comparison Pressure of Chinese High School Students

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ABSTRACT

By interviewing typical Chinese high school students, this paper discusses the influencing factors of peer pressure in the academic environment of Chinese high school, the psychological characteristics reflected by buzzwords such as "involution" and "Buddha-like" and the methods commonly used by high school students to cope with peer pressure. First of all, the influencing factors of peer pressure are widely distributed, ranging from small individuals and families to schools, countries and society. However, "involution" and "Buddha-like" depict two different coping attitudes in the face of such pressure, reflecting two different attitudes. To be more specific, senior high school students can use methods such as downward comparison, self-acceptance, self-motivation and advantages-concentration to increase their mental resilience, psychological endurance and reduce the influence of peer pressure.

Keywords: Peer pressure, social comparison, Chinese high school students

1. INTRODUCTION

Peer pressure is a kind of psychological pressure of individuals who desire to be recognized and accepted by their peers and choose to think or act according to their peers' rules in the development of society. Scholars have found that peer influence can be classified into at least four ways: direct peer pressure, indirect peer models or connection, standard norms and society construction.[1] This paper focuses on peer pressure caused indirectly by competition and comparison in the educational environment. In particular, with such a large population and a limited number of places (i.e. universities) in China, competition often brings uncountable peer pressure under the constraints of regions, families, urban and rural areas and even genders. In recent years, under the influence of the network environment, slung words such as "involution" and "Buddha-like" have been born. It is an interesting phenomenon to turn the originally obscure academic terms into popular slang. This paper intends to explore three questions: 1. In such an environment, what factors affect the peer pressure that individuals experience? 2. What kind of psychological state does this slung word phenomenon reflect? 3. What strategies can individuals use to cope with the pressure brought by competition? So we interviewed 5 typical cases, then transcribed into text for analysis. Our findings are as follows.

2. THE INFLUENCING FACTORS OF ACADEMIC PEER PRESSURE IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

According to the survey, peer pressure of high school students mainly has the following four levels of factors.

2.1. Individual level

First, at the individual level, the factor is motivation. An individual's own motivation affects the extent of peer pressure. In my opinion, if people feel peer pressure, this may indicate that they have upward minds subconsciously, which means that they will feel anxious or even jealous when they see their peers' achievements, because they are not satisfied with themselves and do not meet the expectation of their subconscious, resulting in a sense of psychological gap. They need a constant purpose to keep them oriented, rather than being influenced by others. But if there is no upward motivation, or if the motivation is weak, that emotion is not very remarkable, because the individual is not paying attention actually. For example, when taking an exam, if some hardworking and ambitious students see their classmates who are usually inferior to them do better than them, those students may feel stressed. But for the students who usually are lacking of motivation will not feel stressed at all.

Secondly, personality. Some individuals are more susceptible to the influence of external environmental factors because their inner psychological enduring capacity is too low. And they are more likely to care about their impression and evaluation in others' mind, so they are also more susceptible to the influence of peer pressure. But there are also some people who have a stable inner state, they have a clear understanding of themselves, so this situation is less likely occur for them. The intensity of this emotion can vary with the distances of relationships.

Thirdly, the level of the relationship will also affect the degree of peer pressure an individual feels. Because if an individual sees very close friends having better ability than themselves own, the individual will have stressed emotions. The person thinks that he still has a lot of space to progress and they are more prone to jealousy because they continuously feel that friends and they are people on the same level. If individuals' own subconscious thought contrast with the reality, there will be no adaptation and so on. Due to the strong relationship of friends and individuals, individuals can more practically feel their level of position, then stimulate the individuals' upward motivations. This phenomenon may come from Evolutionary Psychology, which points out that people develop skills in order to continuously progress and adapt to society.

The last point of individual factors is that I think the pressure among students is closely related to their own planning. In international high schools, art students don't have to over-prepare for standardized tests and they have lower GPA requirements, but they need to prepare portfolios and so on. Similarly, if you choose economics as the target major, the pressure somehow will be greater than other students. Because there are many people applying for this major, students need to think about how to let the interviewer choose them among others. So the application competition is fierce, students are likely to have anxiety in GPA and activities. Therefore we can say individuals' plans and outlets also can affect oneself 's psychological state . What's more, instead of pursuing the ranking of the school they apply for, some students focus on the experience of campus and the knowledge they can acquire, they will not feel much stressed when applying, because what they pursue is not the ranking but their own values.

2.2. Household level

First of all, parents' compensatory psychology will indirectly affect the peer pressure children feel. Parents' direct and indirect interference in children's development will make children more susceptible to peer pressure. For example, some parents who feel upset for their own poor academic achievements, place their expectations on their children. They want to regain their confidence from their children's academic achievements and attribute

everything to their good parenting. On the one hand, they want their children to follow their wills. On the other hand, they are unwilling to understand their children's situation and they generally lack empathy.

Second, parents' self-esteem. Some parents have excellent learning ability and think that their children must be as good as themselves, otherwise they will fall behind. Because some excellent parents have high requirements for themselves since childhood, they cannot accept the failures of themselves and people around them. This condition leads them to supervise the children excessively, then the children have no confidence in themselves and will be invisibly affected by peer competition. And if parents find that they have not seen the evident results--- children fail to improve academic performance, parents will also criticize children and expressed their disappointments. Also, parents are too focused on children peer status and compared their children with others. I think this is one of the main factors of children's psychological problems. Because parents accompany their children for the longest time, children are very dependent on their parents. They expect parents to give them warmth, rather than to vent their emotions to children themselves or to react to them disappointedly, which is not beneficial to their self-esteem. Their study or others things also can be disturbed. It is also detrimental to children's own development because adolescence is their golden development period. Too much depressed moods and psychological state will lead to their insufficient hormone secretion, resulting in poor physical condition or mental diseases such as depression, bipolar disorder.

In addition, thirdly, the marital relationship and family atmosphere will also affect the psychological development of children. Husband and wife often fight in front of their children, which will make children unable to feel the warmth of the family. Their psychological state are also unstable, which will make children subconsciously think that no matter how well they learn, they are still isolated and helpless and what they do is meaningless because parents do not express the love. In the most serious case, if children witness the occurrence of domestic violence, it will be extremely detrimental to their psychological development. They are easily influenced by the outside world. Both external evaluation and peer pressure can break down their inner defense. In addition, according to Freud's theory, a large part of individuals' adult behaviors are influenced by unconscious mind, and such unconsciousness is caused by childhood experiences. For example, if the children's family are turbulent, children can be extremely insecure, easily trust others or swayed by others, or often blame themselves for others' achievements. Similarly, due to the lack of affection from family, they are more sensitive and rebellious than ordinary people in the normal supervision and criticism from parents. On the contrary, in a happy family, even if the child is not doing well in some fields,

because of the parents' academic supports and encouragement to the child, the child can have enough motivation to exert his potential advantage in the academic field and stimulate his inner drive.

In addition, the financial strength of the family -- the level of capital also affects the peer pressure children feel. Due to the family's abundant funds and concentration on the development of children, children are usually given high expectations or their life trajectory is relatively clear, which means that they will have extremely high requirements on their study or work, no matter for external or internal factors. This high-level requirements for themselves also manifests in all aspects of life, such as winning every quiz or presenting a superior self at an art recital. But the behavior of requesting themselves too much can be transformed into self-interested personal traits. Some individuals harms others for the sake of their own advancement, putting themselves above all others. They fail to recognize the success of others, which can lead to vicious competition.

2.3. School

Third, the school level. First of all, how teachers communicate with students is also crucial to students. Although the teachers' intentions are positive, which means that they want to push the students, the "provocation method" they use to motivate the children is not useful or the effect is unstable. Because the "severe" words may not make the child sink down to find their own problems, but to follow the meaning of the teacher, constantly denying themselves. And some students is more fragile and sensitive, which means that their psychological states also can be influenced. Many students think that are hard-working enough, but they get bad grades. They are very painful, and then if the teacher still blindly attribute all the faults to them, they will feel hopeless. This is why many students' psychological states breaks down when they are about to enter school and they lose their self-requests. It is because they lose confidence under too strong pressure and their inner gap leads to self-abandonment.

Secondly, the school's consideration and treatment will also have an impact on the development of students. In some areas with great competitive pressure, such as several high-ranking senior high school, there is a rule that school can print students' exam ranking form and posted it in the school auditorium. This action can also affect students' psychological development negatively because exam scores also belong to the privacy of students. Being trampled on their own fruits of labor is not respectful for the human rights of students and can accelerate the students' competition. In addition, the behavior of public recognition and punishment will also aggravate peer pressure, which will increase students' unnecessary anxiety and attention of their studies, and even make malicious comparisons. Moreover, to push

students harder, the school usually reward students in the public for their good grades. This kind of appropriate ideological encouragement is very normal, but the excessive supervision will make students "lose their head". Studying in the strong peer pressure is also not conducive to their learning and the physical and mental health.

2.4. Society and country

Fourthly, due to China's large population base and employment environment, the social and national environment will also affect students' peer pressure. First of all, the society provides people with fewer ways and opportunities for upward mobility, and the classes are solidified and closed. It is difficult for ordinary people to make strides in their work through their own academic level when they have become stereotyped. So students will try their best to enter the universities, desiring the better lives. Rural students, in particular, have to work hard to obtain more opportunities and reach their self-value because of their limited educational resources. This is also a big factor in peer pressure.

Second, for the society, the society pays more attention to filtering for talents people, rather than training them. The latter is expensive, difficult, and requires a lot of efforts and skills. In addition, the selection of talents only needs to be measured by examination. Facing the same goal, people need to catch up with others to get opportunities, so this is also a major factor to increase the competitive atmosphere. Passive choices can lead to peer pressure.

Thirdly, educational inequality exacerbates this phenomenon. At present, there are differences in educational resources among regions in China. For example, there are no good educational resources (teachers and technology) in mountainous areas. As I mentioned, a large number of people flood into cities, which causes the soaring urban population and accelerates the local employment and academic competition.

To sum up, from the microcosmic level to macroscopical level, from individuals and families to countries and societies, all the factors I mentioned will have the impacts on this phenomenon.

3. THE BIRTH OF "INVOLUTION" AND "BUDDHA-LIKE" POPULAR WORDS

In this context, the society has produced some interesting buzzwords -- "involution" and "Buddha-like". These two seemingly opposite words eloquently describe two different states of being confronted with competition.

The word "involution" specifically refers to some people practice to improve the essence of matter, but it is actually just the superposition of meaningless

quantitative change. For example, in some companies, some employees compare working time. they are afraid of losing to the others, who do extra work and leave the company latter. So the employees desperately wait for the time, in order to satisfy their inner desires. This action actually is meaningless because the working time is just a number, which is related to labor efficiency. For example, because of colleagues leave the company at 6 PM. Therefore, I feel a sense of urgency and then leave the company later than he does, so my attitude towards work will also affect the work results. There is also an endless cycle because there are amounts of people who leave work later than you. And the endless cycle is harmful to that person's mental development as well as physical health.

In fact, the word "involution" was originally an academic word related to rural development. It was translated into Chinese by Chinese scholar Huang Zongzhi as "Nei Juan". Its original meaning is that in some agricultural areas with relatively backward economic development in China, due to their lack of agricultural tools and production technology, high production inputs are often unable to obtain corresponding output. So some villagers would think about some most efficient way to improve the production. They believe that their land area is not big enough, so they have land reclamation to maximum efficiency of land utilization. However, this action actually leads to serious environmental problems-- water loss and soil erosion, drought, etc., which actually is against the development situation of crops. This is typically how the concept "involution" indicates in the life. Instead, it is essential to improve your production skills, such as rotation or make production more mechanized and efficient. Having a clear understanding of the situation you are working in is very significant. [2]

Involution is also a product of certain external pressures. "Involution" often has negative impact on students' development to several extents. Due to the educational environment of achieving a high score to enter schools, "involution" can become a mean to achieve a certain purpose (college, work) at the expense of others of winning opportunities and achieving self-value with a meaningless method. For example, some students deliberately take exquisite notes in class time, who actually do not pay attention to listen to the teacher's speech, so their exam results will not achieve ideal one. So the hard-working student affected by passive "involution" is also worthy of sympathy. Sometimes, the school authorities will "force" students to work excessively in order to increase the enrollment rate and reputation of the school. Exam-oriented education itself is boring and single, which means that more formatted exam-oriented education will deprive students' desire of learning and the demand for innovative knowledge.

On the other hand, the word "Buddha-like" seems to be mentioned for less times in recent years, but when the word "involution" is discovered and used, which evokes the memory of people of this word. As the name implies, "Buddha-like" stands for the temperament and spirit of Buddha. "Put down the butcher's knife, site become Buddha", "knife" represents a fierce and evil, (here we see it as "competition"), a "Buddha like" person gradually block out the outside world "secular" crowds and others' academic or work on the competition. Their inner balances is established and they are no longer care about the gap between themselves and others, establishing self cognition and learning rhythms. They may also not be jealous of others' progresses.

However, "Buddha-like" people can also be divided into two types: "self-abnegation" type and "precipitation" type. The first one refers to the reason that they have no academic or other goals simply because they are unwilling to work hard, so they neglect their studies, etc. The latter instead turns the pursuit of learning and self-worth into a greater focus on their own growth and what they want to achieve. Buddha-like people also represent that when there are some quotas to show themselves, they look less at such competition and will not actively fight for it because they do not care about the consequences brought by such competition. Buddha-like quality can be indicated in any way. People with a Buddha-like mindset may gain peace of mind and self-improvement, but may also miss out opportunities and connections, etc.

Compared with "involution" people and "Buddhist-like people", these two groups of people also show completely different attitudes when dealing with problems. The first one may fluctuate greatly and produce negative emotions, such as regrets and sadness. They will also blame their grading teachers and any other factors that may have contributed to their grades, which is meaningless. However, The Buddha-like people are more likely to just "laugh it off" and take a more optimistic attitude towards the next challenge.

4. STRATEGIES AND METHODS FOR COPING WITH PEER PRESSURE

In the face of ubiquitous competition, people not only use witty language to make fun of themselves, but also use a variety of strategies. For example, we found that in today's campus, students cope with peer pressure mainly in the following ways, in order to maintain inner balance and overall emotional stability.

First, downward comparison. Under great peer pressure, when individuals still cannot change their subconscious mind, students can compare themselves with those who are worse than themselves.[3][4] So as to obtain a kind of psychological satisfaction, lower their individual expectations and improve their happiness.[5] This applies both to academics or to maintaining

relationships. For example, when a classmate is handing out the scored exam paper, he continuously see paper with higher score than his own, leading to upset mind. But after that, he become calm down when he also saw some not as good as his score. Because in the process of trying to realize their self-worth, some people who need to rely on peer comparison to obtain satisfaction, whose personality cannot be changed in a short time need to affirm themselves in this way, which is the most effective for them.

Second, recognize deficiencies, lower expectations, and give yourself patience. Because many teenagers will encounter some kind of setback in their academic tasks, such as failing to improve a subject. In addition to the external pressure (teachers, admission environment), students will feel very anxious and discouraged on their own. For this method, such an effective solution is to admit your own shortcomings, which means the difference with others, so you will not restrict yourself with requirements inconsistent with your actual level, give yourself room for improvement and do not pay much attention to the results. This method allows you to be patient enough to make progress and to be satisfied with your progress. Moreover, this method is also helpful to the improvement of the individual's own ability. For example, one of my classmates is clumsy and not good at math. He is always at the bottom of the class in every exam. He is very miserable. But then he came to accept the fact that he was not good at math, and he told himself in his mind that it didn't matter about the results if he just tried his best and took it one step at a time. So he studied mathematics very hard and easily, his final score became above average in the class.

The third is self-encouragement. Self-encouragement tends to set up ideal goals, which is goals higher than the actual level, start from self-encouragement, which means that individuals believe that they can achieve the goal with their own ability. Such a learning process is often accompanied by sufficient motivation because when individuals realize that they are getting closer to the goal, they will be more eager to achieve the goal. Sufficient motivation means more positive emotions, less negative emotions, and less susceptibility to stress. For example, in the international school, at the end of each term, students are anxious about the process evaluation and the final exam, many students are using the method of self motivation: "As long as I get points of the final exam, I can reach A plus level." And you will always encourage yourself and give yourself hope. This also means that power is unlimited, so the result is often not too bad.

Fourth, pay more attention to their advantages. When you find yourself at a disadvantage compared with others about certain aspects, you can focus on your strengths.[6] For example, a classmate is discouraged when his Chinese score is lower than his deskmate's, but he will comfort himself when he think about that his science

score is at the top of the class. By shifting attention, anxiety can be properly avoided, and this method is conducive to the construction of inner self-cognition.

The point of each of these methods is to not let your emotions and environment change yourselves and you need to deal with anxiety and self-doubt. Whether these methods are effective is related to an individual's personality and experience. With the growth of age, the inner stability coefficient, the flexibility of self-cognition and resilience will all increase. And the methods to cope with pressure will be more flexible and skilled.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper discusses the influencing factors of peer pressure in the academic environment of Chinese high school, the psychological characteristics reflected by buzzwords such as "involution" and "Buddha-like" and the methods commonly used by high school students to cope with peer pressure. First of all, the influencing factors of peer pressure are widely distributed, ranging from small individuals and families to schools, countries and society. However, "involution" and "Buddha-like" depict two different coping attitudes in the face of such pressure, reflecting two different attitudes. To be more specific, senior high school students can use methods such as downward comparison, self-acceptance, self-motivation and advantages-concentration to increase their mental resilience, psychological endurance and reduce the influence of peer pressure.

In modern times, due to the fast pace of life and high-speed competition, individuals will be subjected to various pressures in the society. Some students may affect their relationship with others because of their scores. In fact, the original attribute is the influence of their wrong cognition and unfinalized values. Therefore, it is very important for teenagers to learn how to correctly recognize and deal with academic pressure. Proper amount of peer pressure can urge them to make progresses and realize their development potentials. However, the excessive pressure of the environment can make peer pressure counterproductive. Students begin to increase unnecessary anxiety, burden about academic achievement and have too high expectations of themselves, which hurt their self-confidence. In order to improve the situation, schools and parents should be called upon to encourage children's education, refuse to categorize students based on grades intentionally and stimulate children's diversified interests and career development.

This study also finds that buzzwords reflect a certain social development process. The emergence of the words "involution" and "Buddha-like" means that people begin to think about their relationship with others in their own development and make action choices when they are subjected to peer pressure. As I mentioned above, in

today's fast-paced work and academic development, many people do not actively choose "involution". We can only say that their efforts are not in the right direction and cannot bring significant results, rather than that they deliberately engage in malicious competition through quantity superposition.

However, this paper is only a preliminary exploration and there are still many deficiencies. In the future, how to design targeted intervention programs or explore the possibility of revolution in promoting educational equity, etc. are very meaningful research directions.

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