



A Study of Students in Deprived Areas' Self-Development Dilemmas Under the Self-Identity Theory--A Case Study of Small-Town Swots

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Abstract. Small-town Swot (STS) refers to students from poor families in rural China who have been admitted to colleges and universities. As a unique social phenomenon, the development of STS has become a hot issue of concern to society and researchers. In this study, STS was used as the research group, and the interview method was used to analyze the problems and dilemmas of the group's psychology and growth. Through the analysis of the interview content, this paper argues that the STS community mainly faces the following problems. First of all, the source of confidence for this group is mainly the encouragement of the surrounding environment, and there is a lack of a rich self-supporting environment. Secondly, changes in the learning environment make students lack new self-worth construction and lose willpower and self-confidence. In addition, the psychological problems of the STS group need to be paid attention to and taken seriously. At the same time, it is necessary to focus on providing more explicit career education for this group.

Keywords: Small-Town Swot, Self-Identification, Psychological.

1 Introduction

In 2020, the term "Small-Town Swot"(STS) began to appear on Douban, one of China's largest social networking sites and gradually became a hot topic in society [1]. "Small-town swot" is a unique social phenomenon in China. In the Chinese context, "small town" refers to economically underdeveloped rural areas. Therefore, "Small-Town Swot" (STS) typically refers to children from poor rural families in China who, through diligent study, manage to take the college entrance examination and enter universities in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou [2]. The premise is that the college entrance examination, as the fairest selection test in China, is the main way for universities in various regions of China to enroll students each year [3]. Considering the significant differences in the quality of Chinese universities, many universities only require very low scores on the college entrance examination for admission. STS cannot simply be defined as "poverty-stricken college students." To ensure the effectiveness of this study, the scope of STS is relatively specifically de-

fined as students from poor rural families in China who are admitted to 985 and 211 universities.

As a special group, STS have typical characteristics. From an internal environment perspective, feelings of inferiority and loneliness are rooted in the self-identity of STS. The sense of loneliness mostly stems from the isolation from their previous living environment, leaving STS with a lack of effective environmental experience. The sense of inferiority mainly arises from the contradiction between STS's past central position in small-town schools and their current marginal position in elite universities. The expectation of a better future and the reality of their predicament makes the psychological state of "Small-Town Swot" more fragile [1].

This study aims to understand the dilemma of self-development of students in deprived areas using STS as an example and to provide evidence to inform future solutions to the dilemma. Through purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews, the study interviewed 10 Small-Town Swot from different regions, ultimately obtaining 7 valid data.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

To explore the topic and provide more in-depth insights, this paper uses qualitative research, which involves open-ended questions to gather participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors [4]. The study uses semi-structured interviews to collect Semi-structured interviews are more applicable to the STS community through more open-ended, flexible questions exploring the perceptions and attitudes of respondents within a particular topic [5]. After the interviews, the researcher analyzed the data using thematic analysis and inductive reasoning. This is because STS is a new term and the thematic analysis method is more conducive to elucidating the commonalities of STS. The inductive reasoning method is more conducive to explaining the causes of the dilemmas faced by STS. Furthermore, the inductive research method is well suited to discovering new patterns, relationships, or phenomena that cannot be explained by existing theory or knowledge, and it begins with specific observations and then draws general conclusions [6].

2.2 Sampling Methods

Since STS is a new term, purposive sampling was examined as the only sample sampling method, to make sure that each respondent could be more in line with the definition of STS. A total of 11 data samples were collected for the study, of which 7 were valid samples. To ensure the validity of the study, the researchers ensured gender balance. We used emails, phone calls, and social media to find potential respondents. For example, we posted a volunteer recruitment post on social media and contacted potential respondents who were willing to participate in the study. We used phone calls, WeChat, etc., to contact acquaintances who fit the scope of this study directly. To maintain gender balance, we ended up with 3 data samples provided by female

respondents and 4 by male respondents to achieve the purpose of data diversification and comprehensiveness. Table 1 shows the participants' demographics in detail.

Table 1. The details of the participants

Participant No.	Gender	Age	Job description/learning content
A	Female	27	Lawyer
B	Female	25	Purchasing agent
C	Female	23	Foreign Trade Clerk
D	Male	23	Civil servant
E	Male	25	Competition Teacher
F	Male	25	Preparing for Postgraduate Entrance Examination
G	Male	26	Studying for a Master's Degree

In the data analysis and discussion section, the study uses self-identity theory for discussion.

3 Discussion

To better understand the self-development dilemma facing STSs, the study utilized Giddens' self-identity theory to analyze primary data and compare them with existing literature [7]. The self-identity theory posits that the self is the bearer of self-worth, closely linked to feelings of pride, shame, and dignity. Shame is the negative aspect of the motivational system of the actor, stemming from the failure to meet expectations in constructing the ideal self. Dignity and pride, on the other hand, contribute to the narrative integrity and confidence in the self-identity [7]. This study explores the dilemmas in the learning and development process of STS groups, which are mainly reflected in the following six aspects.

3.1 Single Source of Confidence and Lack of Risk

According to interviews, it is known that students from the STS group often rely on excellent academic performance to enter high school, which is consistent with the views of Deng and Lin. Furthermore, the single standardized test-based evaluation criteria in high school can relatively align with the advantages of STS students. On the one hand, under this evaluation criteria, high school teachers often pay more attention to students' academic performance, and show extra tolerance and care towards students who excel in this area. On the other hand, the "gaokao" (national college entrance examination) is considered almost the only way to upward mobility in small-town families and holds high authority among the small-town community [8]. Therefore, children with good academic performance often receive more warmth and care from their parents. This care helps to build the confidence of STS students, enabling them to achieve a certain degree of "self-identification".

However, this confidence mainly relies on the encouragement from the surrounding environment, rather than the rich inner world of the individual STS students. While gaining confidence, they become increasingly worried that a decline in their academic performance could lead to losing their current comfortable environment, such as losing the teachers' tolerance, parents' affection, etc. For example, interviewee C mentioned in an interview.

"During high school, my grades were quite decent, which means I was doing well in my studies. I did not find learning particularly difficult, and I was doing okay on tests. My regular grades and class performance were satisfactory, and the teachers also valued me. Therefore, I did not feel pressured about studying; the pressure was more about the fear of not performing well in exams."

Therefore, this self-construction is fragile. This also leads to STS being more susceptible to losing confidence in the future due to poor academic performance, and further leaning towards another extreme of self-doubt.

3.2 The Loss of Willpower and Confusion in College

The strict supervision model of "super high school" provides children from poor families with the opportunity for upward social mobility, but it also creates a disconnect between their high school and college life environments [9]. In high school, the STS group only needs to consider how to get into an ideal college and escape their current living environment. At this time, they rely on willpower to study. However, as Nadir pointed out, willpower is a limited resource [10]. When the college entrance examination is over and the goal is achieved, the sudden relaxation of mental pressure brings about a loss of willpower. Worse still, the suddenly rich world of the university accelerates the collapse of come such willpower. Interviewee E said in the interview.

"I found that the teaching methods in college are different from before. The previous study management was relatively clear, it provided me with a path to follow, and I might find it easier to follow along. In college, it only gives me a plan, and lets me find my direction. I might be more confused and stay in place."

Confusion permeated the college years of most interviewed STS, becoming one of the sources of their loss of confidence. They lack the construction of new self-worth, and the original self-worth cannot be continued, laying the groundwork for their subsequent mindset changes.

Faced with this sense of confusion, STS also attempted to rescue themselves. For example, interviewee E attempted to rescue themselves by changing majors, and interviewee F attempted to rescue themselves by joining the military. Unfortunately, the interview data obtained by researchers may represent a potential survivor bias. Most volunteers willing to be interviewed have obtained opportunities for reselection through various means, and not all small-STS can escape from this confusion. Interviewee B mentioned in the interview.

"Actually, I am not the one with the most severe psychological problems. I took a psychological test at that time, and it showed that I was not in a state of depression. But many of our classmates in the major were tested to have moderate or severe depression."

However, it is difficult for us to capture data from this group because they are resistant to interviews. Whether the psychological state of this group differs from the current interviewees remains a research gap.

3.3 Peer Competition and Poor "Self"

Due to the relatively lower quality of education and thinking patterns in the high school stage STSs in major cities, the general foundation of STSs is relatively poor [2]. This poor foundation is first reflected in academic performance upon entering university. Almost all the interviewees experienced setbacks in their academic performance, causing the confidence they gained from their excellent grades in high school to start crumbling. Interviewee E emphasized.

"After entering university, I tried math first. Because I used to like math more, but math was a big blow to me. I found that I did not know anything compared to those in the math department. So learning math was very frustrating."

"Competition and comparison" are high-frequency words that appeared in the interviews. The geographical disconnection from the past environment makes them tend to seek help and comfort from peers in the nearby environment when encountering such problems, which to some extent is effective. However, peers are also "competitors," and this competition may bring them greater pressure. They mistakenly believe that the college entrance examination is the end of competition, without preparing psychologically and building the capacity to face more long-term and intense competition, causing STSs to compete with their peers in a state of exhaustion [2]. The vulnerability of self-worth construction exacerbates the collapse of confidence when their poor academic performance is starkly contrasted with others' excellent grades, even leading them to develop feelings of inferiority. For example, interviewee B stated.

"I feel that my classmates in college can not comfort me. For example, I have a classmate who studies quite well, she can not understand. Why did I still perform poorly after reviewing? Well, it's because she is the kind of person who performs well after reviewing. I was quite jealous at one point."

However, researchers believe that this sense of inferiority may not have started at this time, but has always existed. The so-called "competitors" in the competition are "hypothetical enemy" constructed by the STS group. For creating an enemy, essentially there is no need for manifested aggression rather we feel threatened by a thing related to our desirable condition [11]. The "inferiority" of STSs during their university years may be due to their ideals not being met (such as not being able to achieve the excellent grades they imagined). In fact, due to the diversity of university development, pure academic competition is almost non-existent [2]. The test-takers from small towns, confined by the inherent thinking of past exam-oriented education, have actively trapped themselves in "pure academic competition."

3.4 Isolated World and Lonely Individuals

STS generally lack the cultivation of quality education. After entering university, a diversified quality education model replaced the single exam-oriented education model [2]. The lack of cultural capital puts STS at a disadvantage when facing more comprehensive competition, as they are unable to excel in academic performance or receive praise in areas such as sports, and arts. The diminished sense of presence further exacerbates the already growing feelings of inferiority. For example, interviewee G mentioned.

"I feel that the environment is different, and I am not as well-rounded as them. Because most of my time and energy from childhood to now has been spent on doing exercises. Whether it's physical exercise, literary cultivation, or artistic cultivation, I have not had much exposure to them."

However, in the face of severe psychological problems, STS did not actively seek or passively receive effective psychological interventions. Active communication is an effective means to alleviate anxiety [12]. Researchers noticed that in the interviews, few interviewees mentioned "communication," whether it was with peers or professional psychological counselors. The high self-esteem of STS makes this group worry about being ridiculed and thus avoid communication due to reasons such as accent and family background [2]. For example, interviewee C mentioned.

"When I first entered university, I felt a gap. My Mandarin was not very good at the time because we spoke dialects in high school. It took me some time to adapt. But by the time I adapted, you had already finished talking. So maybe because of the language barrier, I could not communicate with you promptly. Also, seeing everyone having good conditions since childhood, I felt a bit inferior at the time."

The pattern of isolating and closing themselves off makes STS almost completely unwilling to seek help from the outside world when facing psychological difficulties. Furthermore, they even reject external interventions, making it very limited for others to discover the severe psychological difficulties faced by STS.

What's worse, the effectiveness of the current courses and methods for solving psychological difficulties in universities is questionable. Many schools use large-scale teaching methods, which cannot address individual problems. Therefore, most STS consider the school's psychological counseling courses as "useless decorations." Schools with psychological counseling departments that can provide targeted assistance are also very limited, which means not every student with psychological problems can make an appointment with a counselor. The lack of effective means to solve psychological difficulties exacerbates the "loneliness" of STS.

However, there are also a few STS who have managed to overcome their loneliness through self-adjustment of their mindset. But this usually requires a long period of persistence. This kind of loneliness is usually gradually lost after starting work, and often accompanies the accumulation of wealth, which researchers will discuss in the next part.

3.5 High-paying Jobs and Self-confidence Reconstruction

The preference for high-paying jobs among the STS is very evident. "Pursuing high salaries" has become a high-frequency term in their work life. To some extent, money helps STS individuals enhance their self-confidence and reconstruct their self-worth. For example, when talking about their work experiences, participant C emphasized.

"You have money, so you can have more choices. For example, I signed up for a swimming class. Maybe in the past, other classmates had their parents provide them with certain conditions. But now, if I want to go, I can just sign up myself. Because I have money, I can participate."

Interestingly, researchers found that from the beginning of their working period, the reconstruction of self-confidence among the STS group gradually detached from the native environment they used to rely on. A representative finding is that the STS group no longer primarily uses their parents' and their parents' environment evaluations as the main criteria and basis for choosing jobs. A considerable number of STS chose jobs that their parents opposed, considering their parents' views to be outdated and negative. For example, participant C mentioned.

"I do not share much about my work life with them (parents). Because as soon as I talk about my work, they will feel that my current job does not count as a job. Then they often chat and say, 'Hurry back, hurry, and find a job.' I feel that my family, their mindset brings some negative and feudal thoughts."

However, there is also a small portion of STS individuals who choose to return to their hometown or work in places close to their hometown. Researchers believe that this may be due to the extension of past feelings of loneliness. This group often attributes this loneliness to the unfamiliarity of the environment and the coldness of the city. For example, participant E expressed.

"I do not like the working atmosphere in big cities, I do not like the intensity of their work. I prefer to go back to my hometown. The intensity of work in the city itself makes one feel lonely and adrift, very insecure."

In this regard, returning to a familiar environment helps them regain the sense of security they once had. In the familiar environment, the reduced competitive pressure makes it easier for them to achieve success once again. This helps them regain their confidence more easily. Researchers believe that this is also a form of self-worth reconstruction. However, this reconstruction of value is achieved by returning to a familiar environment, which still repeats the path dependence of the past. The efforts that the STS individuals once made to "go out" may eventually transform into a cycle of "coming in."

3.6 Diversified Evaluation Criteria and Regeneration of Inferiority

Interview data shows that after entering the workforce, the evaluation criteria faced by the STS group are no longer limited to domestic standards, but have expanded to international standards. The internationalization of evaluation criteria has elevated English proficiency as a necessary job skill. The scope of competition for the STS group

has also expanded from their domestic university classmates to students returning from studying abroad in various countries.

Colleagues with international perspectives and study abroad experiences often have better family resources and more fluent English abilities, which can put STS at a disadvantage in competition. Furthermore, faced with these differences, most STS tend to use the thinking methods inherited from the exam-oriented education system to compensate. For example, they improve their English proficiency through tests like the IELTS. However, second language acquisition often requires a certain language environment, and the test-oriented approach has a limited impact on oral proficiency.

As a result, the repeated unsuccessful attempts have led to a sense of frustration within STS since graduation, giving rise to their inferiority complex once again. However, researchers believe that the adaptability developed from STS's past experiences has served as a buffer in the rapidly changing work environment. This allows some STS to maintain a stable mindset in the competitive environment of resources and international standards.

4 Conclusion

Using the STS group as an example, this study explored the dilemmas of self-development for students from poor families and prepared evidence for subsequent policy development. The study obtained primary data through semi-structured interviews, which were discussed in conjunction with the literature. Combined with self-perception theory, the study summarised six representative dilemmas that existed in the sample and attempted to provide explanations.

However, due to the limited nature of the interview sample, the data of the study may not be representative of the whole group. Furthermore, efforts were made in the direction of gender balancing to ensure that the sample was not affected by gender factors, but in the course of the study, the researcher also found differences in the different dilemmas due to different genders. The researchers look forward to future studies exploring this aspect.

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