

The Narrative Symptoms and Cultural Context of "Involution"-- Taking College Student Group As an Example

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Abstract: In recent years, "involution" has transformed from an obscure sociological term to a phenomenal buzzword. In the context of "involution", the general public, especially college students, widely expresses anxiety and inferiority complex, the helplessness of "forced involution", the behavior of "pseudo-active life" and even the alienation of interpersonal interaction. These are concentrated expressions of the narrative symptoms of "involution". As a product of semantic transmutation and new media information exchange, it has become a network discourse linking college students and reflecting a specific cultural context. Taking the college student group as an example, from the perspectives of sociology, psychology and communication, this paper combines the questionnaire research to sort out the narrative symptoms and the cultural context of "involution", explore the reasons behind it and propose strategies to ease it, which is conducive to providing valuable information for the public who are widely affected by "involution" nowadays. It is also a theoretical tool for explaining and reflecting on many social phenomena in China.

Keywords: "Involution"; narrative syndrome; cultural context; college students

The term "involution" can be traced back to Kant, Goldenweiser, and systematized by Gertz. During that period, the core concept of "involution" evolved from Kant's "inward evolution" to Goldenweiser's "internal refinement and complexity," while Gertz made it widely known in anthropological and sociological circles, and "involution" thus became the exclusive concept for describing the phenomenon of social retardation. The American scholar Prasenjit Duara extended this concept to the level of state power. Huang Zongzhi introduced this concept to China and applied it to agriculture, arguing that the key point of involution is "the diminishing marginal returns of labor". In short, previous academic discussions on "involution" have mainly focused on the political, institutional, and agricultural levels, and the concept has been used to describe "the phenomenon of a social or cultural model that reaches a definite form at a certain stage of development and then stagnates or cannot be transformed into another advanced model."

In recent years, the concept of "involution" has been rapidly expanding, and in addition to political and economic applications, it is also used to describe "irrational" or "volunteered" competition in work, selection, and even university life. In recent years, research on college students has been developing rapidly. For example, Yang Qixie and Xu Mingsheng described in detail the characteristics and negative effects of the "involution" mentality of college students and proposed strategies for its diversion at the level of the ideological and political system in Present College Students' Mental Representation of "Involution" and Its Counseling Strategies. Fang Hui's Exploring the Anxiety Communication of Young People in the Field of Involution analyzes the internal causes of anxiety propagation from the perspectives of psychology and communication; Zhao Xianghui further refines this group and specifically discusses the characterization, mechanism and treatment of "involution" from the perspective of doctoral students.

The above-mentioned studies have important reference value. However, there is a lack of research on the "involution" of college students in China. Most of the studies have focused on a specific level only; at the same time, most of the studies have focused on the analysis of the reasons behind the phenomenon at the level of the internal mentality of the college students, and there are fewer analyses of the reasons at the level of the college education system. This paper attempts to conduct an in-depth study of this phenomenon from a more systematic, comprehensive and innovative perspective.

1. The Narrative Symptoms of "Involution"

1.1 The Cultural Representation of "Involution"

The term "involution" is popular among college students, and first originated from several pictures on the Internet in the second half of 2020: some people read books on bicycles, some people's beds were covered with stacks of books, and there were even "The Involution Kings of Tsinghua University" who used computers while riding bicycles..... "Involution" as a term to describe irrational internal competition, began to circulate among the students of Tsinghua University and Peking University, the most prestigious universities in China. An article titled "GPA is the Top Priority: The Prisoner's Dilemma of Young People in China's Top Universities" has further contributed to the spread of "involution". The author of the article talked about the status quo of involution at Tsinghua University and Peking University: "These brightest young people in China are facing a common dilemma: in extreme competition, success overwhelms growth, peers compete with each other, which leads to exhaustion."

After this, the term "involution" was further expanded to include office workers, students and other groups. In the process of its widespread use and dissemination, "involution" has gradually evolved into a network buzzword, and its meaning has become more generalized in the process of dissemination, and is now widely used to describe the current situation of excessive social competition, and has even given rise to a series of derivative works about "involution".

1.2 Mental Representation of "Involution"

The rapid spread of the term "involution" among the general public, especially among college students is, to a large extent, due to the accurate and succinct expression of the phenomenon faced by the college student community in general, thus triggering widespread resonance. Through the term "involution", college students can see their own lives, as well as other people in the same situation as themselves. Exhausted by the vicious competition brought about by "involution" but unable to change, they all use the term "involution" for mental and emotional release. This phenomenon is known as "shared reality" in social psychology.

First of all, the "involution" mentality of college students is firstly reflected in the anxiety of facing fierce competition. As a special group with transitional nature, college students often face double pressure from academics and employment. Academically, they need to consider issues such as grades, research and competitions, because according to the traditional selection criteria for higher education, these issues are directly related to their personal ability and competitiveness, and whether they can be good enough to stand out among their peers.

In terms of employment, college students often face the problem of whether their own majors match their employment direction, whether they match their own interests or whether their employment intentions conflict with their parents' ideas. Among the results shown in the project research, some college students choose the majors they do not like, which results in a lack of motivation to study, and the decline in grades caused by this result makes college students unable to change their own professional direction, and then fall into the dilemma of lack of future planning and confusion about the future. At the same time, many college students hope that they can guide their own development by their own interests in the future and take their interests as their careers, but their parents either oppose their children's employment intentions because they lack knowledge of the relevant knowledge and directly oppose their children's employment intentions on the ground that "interest itself cannot buy you a living", or are influenced by traditional concepts and hope that their children choose careers with stable income (such as civil servants).

Secondly, this mentality is also reflected in the inferiority and frustration caused by comparison and competition, especially the series of mentality bred by comparing with peers. According to social comparison theory, people often want to clearly assess their own value and ability, but due to the lack of objective assessment tools, they tend to choose individuals similar to themselves for comparison, especially in peer groups. However, in the process of comparison, people always find

that their peers are far more valuable and capable than they are, and when they are surprised, they have doubts about their own ability and value. This further brings about a decline in self-confidence, increased frustration, and even self-denial.

Finally, this mentality is also reflected in the alienation of self and the deformation of interpersonal relationships among college students in the fierce competition with each other. As mentioned above, there is fierce competition among college students due to limited resources and status disparity; this competition is reflected even more in the group of students of the same school and the same major. They regard students of the same level as their competitors, and aspire to surpass each other so that they can occupy the place alone. In this process, competition is no longer the "proper competition", but the "vicious competition"; classmates are no longer friends, but rivals in the "law of the jungle", enemies who seize resources with themselves. In the competition, college students lose their initiative and creativity, and it is difficult for them to give full play to their essential strength, and their personality is alienated. As Marx said, "the more insignificant your existence is, the less you express your life, and the more your alienated nature accumulates."

1.3 Behavioral Representation of "Involution" -- "Forced Involution" and "Pseudo-positive Life" of Some College Students "

The "forced involution" here mainly refers to the phenomenon that some college students are forced to compete with others due to the lack of their own planning and self-understanding, and the fear of being different from others, but in fact they are irritable and negative. These college students have neither their own interests nor preferences, nor do they plan their future and direction rationally and scientifically, and the only path before them is to study, but they have no internal motivation to participate in "active involution". But in the face of the involution of the people around them, the social instinct of human beings requires them to adapt to others and the environment, and for the need to fit in, most of them choose to follow the trend, but they also often experience the tedium of learning. They are torn between "involution" and "lying flat", but they are also exhausted and depressed in this tangled process. They seem to work hard, but what they do is ineffective and meaningless.

The "pseudo-positive life" emphasizes the discrepancy between the side people show to the outside world and their actual situation. For example, the "culture of showing off" is popular nowadays. In order to satisfy their need for attention and praise, people filter out the mediocrity and chaos of their actual lives and show the most exquisite and perfect side of their lives on social media platforms, hoping to seek self-affirmation and value recognition from the praise of others. But in fact, what is behind this behavior is precisely the anxiety of individuals in the face of fierce competition -- they can hardly prove their ability and value through other means, and can only get affirmation and support from the praise of others. What's more, this kind of photo often further spreads anxiety and becomes an important source of anxiety for many college students.

2. The Cultural Context of "Involution"

2.1 An "Involutional" Approach to Language Comprehension

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan emphasized the sense of "semantic stitching", i.e., the rapid linking of some socio-cultural psychology through "discursive associations". Since every language is the language of the actor, language is presented statically, but the way of speech is dynamic. In this dynamic narrative presentation, many distinctive youth culture styles of "involutionized" languages emerge, such as "involution to death" and "read ten of thousands of books".

The essence of these "involutionized" languages is that college students are self-deprecating, and at the same time seek to express their positive life. Faced with the status quo of being "involutionized", they are unable to change it; under the common feeling of strong competitive pressure, they choose to live the same "involutionized" lifestyle. However, it is not enough to have a "shared reality". As social animals, people always need certain tools to connect such

"involutionized" groups, thus forming certain social relationships. It can be said that these "involutionized" languages play such a role, as they are the window for young people facing the dilemma of "involution" to release their emotions, as well as a network discourse link for them to flirt with their dilemmas and encourage and comfort each other at the same time.

2.2 Transmutation From the "Involutionized" to "Involution"

The term "involution" has undergone a transformation from an obscure word in the field of sociology to a high-frequency word on the Internet that is gradually applied to various fields of social life. This reflects the expansion of the domain of application of the word, and also the transmutation of the original meaning and domain of use of "involution".

First, from the perspective of internal factors, the main ones are the expansion of its usage domain and the creation of rhetorical meanings." At the same time, its connotation also changed and simplified: from the initial use to describe "internal complexity and refinement" to the present use to describe "irrational internal competition". The internal transmutation of the "involutionized" language has made it possible for it to be widely disseminated.

Second, from the perspective of external factors, the new media, as a huge information exchange field, provides conditions for the "involution" to be noticed and spread in a short period of time. For example, on December 4, 2020, the magazine Yaowen Jiaozi released the top ten buzzwords for 2020, and the word "involution" was listed in. It is used in the media, news headlines and online phrases, and unknowingly draws the attention of the public.

3. Analysis of the Causes and Negative Effects of "Involution"

3.1 Fierce Competition Due to Pressure for Further Education

The prevailing pressure of further education in China is an important external reason for the existence of "involution". In 2022, for example, the number of applicants for the 2022 national master's entrance examination reached 4.57 million, an increase of 800,000 compared to 2021; and according to the 2022 national line of postgraduate entrance examination, the master's acceptance rate is 24.2%, which means that 3.4 million people will fail the exam.

The tremendous pressure of higher education will first make college students and their parents anxious. In order to relieve their anxiety, they will devote their time and energy to what they think is the most important thing, i.e., improving their performance in the subject of the exam. The number of classes enrolled to appease the anxiety generated by the fierce competition and uncertainty in their hearts. The company's main goal is to make up for the shortfall in effort with the money invested, but without scientific planning, sensible selection and comprehensive analysis, rather like a "sick and desperate" feeling.

Secondly, in the face of the pressure of further education, college students and their parents will emphasize the importance of scores and test-taking in the process of perception of further education selection, pursuing utilitarian goals but neglecting their own comprehensive academic quality and ability. This is a narrow understanding of achieving excellence in higher education as a result of "memorization" or "doing excessive exercises", with deeper understanding and independent thinking taking a back seat, and college students being alienated into tools for test-taking.

3.2 Path Dependence Arising From the Solidification of the Evaluation System

The evaluation system here is based on the evaluation standard of comprehensive quality of college students, but its operation principle is also applicable to the system of dissertation publication and other related systems. The so-called "three-dimension evaluation" is commonly used in universities, that is, the system of examining various aspects such as ideological and political quality, academic competitions, academic publications, student work and social practice, and adding points according to national, provincial, municipal and university levels, that is, quantifying comprehensive quality into visible scores. The initial intention of this system is good,

but after this evaluation standard is modeled, it forms a "path dependency" that is difficult to stop once it happens, and also creates the illusion that things are still developing steadily, but hides the problems behind it.

First of all, the "cult of score" brought by the evaluation standards has dissipated the original purpose of the development. The fundamental point of the evaluation system is to urge the improvement of students' comprehensive quality, but the standards are often formulated to reduce the cost of development and facilitate the assessment, and the evaluation criteria are simplified into a number of indicators, which essentially fall into the same "score cult" as the examination, and are easily alienated and deformed in the process of implementation. One of the points is that the quantified score results can hardly accurately reflect the real quality level of college students. Worst of all, the use of such external, quantitative rules that incorporate performance standards to discipline students can easily lead to opportunistic, utilitarian habits, rather than focusing on the real improvement of their own quality.

The second is that the transfer of responsibility for the subject weakens the school's responsibility. This paper does not deny that the student body should also play an active role, but the school should also take the responsibility of cultivating the comprehensive quality of students, and the teacher has the right to evaluate the overall quality of students. However, the comprehensive quality evaluation system, because of its quantifiability, objectivity and low cost of evaluation, has gradually replaced the teacher as the main subject of evaluation, and the multiple qualities of students are replaced by this scoring standard, and the teacher only sees the quantified scores according to the standard when conducting the evaluation, but has less of his or her own subjective feelings.

The third is that the high correlation between evaluation results and grades triggers college students to involution. Most of the universities are ranked by professional grades and overall quality grades in a certain proportion which means that students cannot focus on only one of the two. If they focus only on their major grades, they are likely to be overtaken by students who are relatively behind in their major grades but have excellent overall grades, according to the algorithm. It is because of this "high correlation" and the fear of being overtaken that the comprehensive quality evaluation system can work effectively. However, we need to further consider whether the behavior of college students competing for the "three-dimension evaluations" is due to the desire to improve the overall quality or the shackles of the system. If it is the former, then there is no need for this system to exist; if it is the latter, then the university has created a large number of students with utilitarian tendencies, who are forced or actively inwardly rolled under this mandatory system, social practice, student work, etc. are alienated in their eyes to become a tool to achieve their own interests, instead of losing the function and purposes of universities.

3.3 Group Mentality Arising From the External Environment

The external environment here refers to the unified "comply or get out" environment constituted by the above-mentioned factors such as the pressure to go on to higher education, the evaluation system and peer competition. In this environment, the language used by the college students deserves our attention once again -- excluding the above-mentioned "involutionized" language as an outgrowth of self-deprecation and flirtation and the search for a positive life, the other part of "dark lessons" born in the "involution" environment reflects a completely different mentality. For example, "hardworking does not necessarily mean results, but not hardworking must be very comfortable", and "losers will always be losers". What is behind the language actually reflects the self-irony and self-denial of student groups. "Involution" leads to anxiety, and anxiety leads to decadence. Finally, it becomes a vicious cycle. In addition to the objective pressure brought by the external environment, the subjective mentality of the student group influenced by the decadence atmosphere is also an important reason for the anxiety and the intensification of involution.

4. Solutions and Guidance Strategies of the "Involution" Mentality

In the context of "involution", the anxiety and low self-esteem of college students have their own causes. Based on the analysis of the causes, this paper will provide strategies from the perspectives of future planning, self-awareness, subject creation and emotional guidance for this group of college students.

For college students who are forced to participate in this "involution", the root cause of their behaviors is unclear future planning and imperfect self-cognition, so they lose themselves in "forced involution", and it is difficult for their initiative to play. First of all, college students can gain a deeper understanding of their own personality characteristics, career interests and strengths and weaknesses through various ways, such as "MBTI test" and "Hollander career test", and even spend part of their time on exploring their interests and trial and error. This exploration process may seem time-consuming, but its long-term benefits are obvious: it will reduce students' anxiety and emotional exhaustion in the "forced involution", and bring students a clearer perception of themselves, and more likely to clarify their own planning direction; in turn, college students are more likely to take their own goals as their own under the general "involution". As a result, college students are more likely to study and live with their own goals under the general "internal volume", and even develop their interests into careers. Secondly, on the basis of understanding oneself, one can develop a strong sense of self and subjectivity, and thus promote the creativity of the subject. "Self-awareness is the ability to see oneself from an external perspective, a uniquely human characteristic and the source of the highest human qualities." This means that one's activities do not start from external requirements, but follow one's own inner subjective will. In contrast to young people who are alienated in the process of "involution," the group of students with a sense of subjectivity is more inclined to see themselves as subjects with independent thoughts and opinions, and are more likely to work and create from their own ideas. The fact that students pay attention to the whole process of generating and implementing their own ideas in the process of labor gives them a sense of happiness, security, and accomplishment, rather than self-denial in repetitive and inefficient labor.

For college students who suffer from anxiety despite their "active involution", the school and the media should also take the responsibility, in addition to the self-regulation and guidance that students themselves should do. First of all, the school body should take the initiative to adjust the relevant evaluation system, lighten the correlation between the comprehensive quality evaluation system and academic achievement and elimination color; even develop a more diversified, more flexible tension evaluation system. Although the indicators in this evaluation system are comprehensive, they are highly correlated with academic achievement and are prone to alienation and deformation in the implementation process, thus not accurately reflecting students' quality and ability. Second, the school body should strengthen psychological guidance and implement its responsibility to students as the main body responsible for their training. For example, reversing students' perceptions of the correlation between current studies and future development, guiding students to look rationally at peer competition, and encouraging students to explore learning based on a full understanding of themselves and their future plans. This requires teachers or counselors to play the role of a "bridge" or "link" to communicate with students, and to guide them on the basis of a full understanding of their situation. Finally, new media, as a huge information exchange field with a low entry barrier, has also become a platform for rendering anxiety in order to obtain traffic dividends. In response to this chaos, while strengthening content screening, the relevant authorities should also guide content creators to shoulder their social responsibility and consider the consequences of their dissemination and social impact while creating content, rather than short-sightedly taking into account only the economic benefits associated with themselves.

5. Conclusion

The propagation and development of "involution" of college students has become a common social phenomenon, which is driven by various factors such as the university system, external pressure and internal anxiety of student groups. Facing this phenomenon, college students are anxious and panic-stricken, or have low self-esteem and frustration. In addition to the responsibility of universities, parents and new media, college students should understand themselves and make clear future planning and goal setting. At the same time, they should be able to self-regulate and guide themselves in the face of "involution" without anxiety and blindness. In the final analysis, the crack of "involution" still requires students' "self-transition".

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