

# Involvement Affects the Subjective Well-being of College Students Literature Review

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**Abstract:** With the intensification of social competition, the phenomenon of involution has become increasingly common among college students, which has a profound impact on the psychological health and subjective well-being of individuals. The purpose of this paper is to explore the main mechanisms by which involution affects college students' subjective well-being, as well as to actively propose improvement suggestions for the problem. Through a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature, this study reveals how the phenomenon of involution affects college students' sense of well-being through increased stress and anxiety, social comparison and self-denial, lack of satisfaction of individual psychological needs, social support, and interpersonal relationships; and it also suggests that college students' subjective well-being can be effectively enhanced by strengthening mental health education and improving lifestyles.

**Keywords:** Subjective Well-Being; Involution; Influence Mechanism; College Students.

## 1. Introduction

President Xi Jinping pointed out that "the foundation of colleges and universities lies in the establishment of moral integrity and cultivation of talents. Only colleges and universities that cultivate first-class talents can become world-class universities." From this, it can be seen that adhering to the core of establishing morality and cultivating first-class talents with both virtue and talent is a fundamental way for colleges and universities to enhance the quality of education and improve the level of education. However, the current phenomenon of involution commonly faced by college students is not conducive to the cultivation of talents in colleges and universities to a certain extent. First of all, in terms of "virtue", involution is not conducive to college students to develop an excellent style. Secondly, as far as "human" is concerned, the phenomenon of scrolling will have a negative impact on the subjective well-being of college students. Therefore, it is important and imperative to study college students' involution behavior. The purpose of this study is to clarify the intrinsic connection between involvement and college students' subjective well-being, to understand the mechanism of involvement's influence on subjective well-being, and to actively provide suggestions for measures to alleviate the negative impact of involvement.

## 2. Research Related to Subjective Well-being of College Students

### 2.1. Definition of Subjective Well-being

Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to an individual's overall evaluation of his/her quality of life based on his/her own set standards, and is a multidimensional, comprehensive psychological indicator that includes two basic components: life satisfaction and emotional experience. The former reflects the individual's subjective assessment of his/her own quality of life as a whole, which is a cognitive process involving a comprehensive review of the living environment. The latter covers a variety of emotional states experienced by individuals in their daily lives, which include not only

positive emotions such as happiness and relaxation, but also negative emotional experiences such as depression, anxiety, and tension. With the basic characteristics of subjectivity, stability and wholeness, it can sensitively reflect people's concerns and feelings about the quality of their existence.

### 2.2. Subjective Well-being Measures

In measuring subjective well-being, most scholars chose to use some or all of the components of the International College Survey (ICS) questionnaire developed by Professor Diener and others at the University of Illinois, USA. It includes basic personal information, Subjective Well-Being Scale, Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), Positive Affect Negative Affect Scale (PANAS), external norms, social relationships, self-experience and so on. In addition, the General Well-Being Scale (GWB) developed by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) in the United States of America, and the Affective Balance Scale (ABS) developed by Bradburn in 1969 are also often used to measure subjective well-being, although the former is mainly used to measure the cognitive dimension of subjective well-being, and the latter is mainly used to measure the affective dimension of subjective well-being.

However, our scholars have found that the above scales do not quite fit the basic situation of our people, leading to a much higher possibility of bias in the research results. After a series of studies and experiments, several scholars in China have improved the subjective well-being questionnaire, including the General well-being Scale revised by Duan Jianhua in 1996 on the basis of Fazio, the Subjective well-being Scale for Urban Residents in China compiled by Xing Zhanjun in 2003, the Subjective well-being Scale for College Students compiled by Ji Nan and Li Yuhui in 2006[7], and so on.

### 2.3. Empirical Results with Our College Students

Scholars such as Yan Biao-bin (2003) found that college students' subjective well-being was at a medium-high level[13][13], whereas Chen Xiaoyi (2014) found that college

students' subjective well-being was at a medium-low level[1], which may indicate that contemporary college students' subjective well-being is decreasing compared to the past.

Explore the influencing factors of college students' subjective well-being from the following three perspectives:

In terms of the three main dimensions of subjective well-being, Yan Biao-bin (2003) identified five effective variables in regression analyses of subjective well-being, namely, life satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect, self-experience, and extrinsic norms, and the analyses found that the key variables affecting subjective well-being, in order of their relative predictive weights, were: positive affect (0.165), life satisfaction (0.099), negative affect (0.057), self-experience (0.019), and external standards (0.002). This result supports the idea that subjective well-being is mainly composed of positive and negative affect and life satisfaction. Notably, positive affect was significantly more heavily weighted than life satisfaction, suggesting that affective factors have a more critical influence on subjective well-being than cognitive factors[14].

Taking the individual's social relationships as a foothold, Chinese and foreign scholars have argued that there is a significant positive correlation between social support (e.g., family relationships, friendships, romantic relationships, and roommate relationships, etc.) and subjective well-being as well as all dimensions of subjective well-being, and that different sources of social support play different roles in predicting overall subjective well-being and its indicators (e.g., in addition to family support, overall subjective well-being, negative affect were more often associated with friend support, and life satisfaction and positive affect were more often associated with other support)[15]. However not all types of social support positively enhance subjective well-being. Hong (2018) argues that emotional social support does not positively enhance well-being because people tend to be helped substantively, and if only emotional care is available, it is not effective in enhancing subjective well-being. This research finding disproves Kim and Lee's (2010) conclusion[27].

Considering individual's value orientation, including internal values (e.g., self-goal fulfilment, learning ability, morality, etc.) and external values (e.g., health level and academic scores), Yufang Zhao (2023) found that individuals in a higher social class tended to report higher subjective well-being. However, this positive correlation is not static and it is moderated by the moderating effect of an individual's self-enhancing values. The strength of self-enhancing values may indirectly contribute to an individual's well-being by influencing the extent to which their basic psychological needs are met. Specifically, when individuals overemphasize self-enhancing values, they may neglect to satisfy their psychological needs, and this neglect may negatively affect their well-being. Even if these individuals achieve significant academic or occupational success in the face of intense competition, they may not truly experience happiness[20][20]. Thus, the study emphasizes the importance of attending to and satisfying intrinsic psychological needs while pursuing personal development.

In addition to this, subjective well-being levels also show significant differences in demographic variables. According to Yang (2009), positive affect shows significant differences in gender and ethnicity and negative affect shows significant differences in ethnicity and origin. Social support/core self-evaluation was significantly positively correlated with life

satisfaction and positive affect and significantly negatively correlated with negative affect[16]. Chen Xiaoyi (2014) further found that females had highly significant higher overall life satisfaction and positive affect scores than males, while there was no difference in negative affect scores. College students of different majors did not differ in overall life satisfaction and positive and negative emotions, but there was a significant difference in the grade dimension[1]. Zhou Cuijin (2005) suggested that the mean scores of urban college students were higher than those of rural college students in all dimensions[21], and Zhang Junhua (2011) verified the correctness of this conclusion, pointing out that this was related to the disadvantages of rural college students in social comparisons and the difficulties in adapting from the countryside to the city in two aspects. And it further indicates that the difference in well-being between urban and rural college students shows a trend of slowly becoming smaller[18]. This may be due to the balanced development between urban and rural areas in China. While Hui (2020) suggested that e-commerce and RESC can effectively improve the subjective well-being of rural residents[23]; Li Jinping (2007) suggested that economic status is an important factor affecting the subjective well-being of college students, and that college students with poor economic status have correspondingly lower levels of subjective well-being[9]; and Zhang Yi (2010) argued that the formation of subjective well-being is dependent on the modulation of the human attitude. In statistical significance, female college students with high social status of parents, belonging to large and medium-sized cities in the region before enrolment, and consistently excellent academic performance have high subjective well-being[19]. It is consistent with the previous findings.

The short answer to the question of how to improve subjective well-being is that there is a need to reduce negative emotions while increasing individual life satisfaction and positive emotions. Pilcher (1997) argued that in addition to sleep quantity, attention should also be paid to the effect of sleep quality on subjective well-being[24], while Lemola (2013) suggested that low daily variation in sleep duration is associated with better subjective sleep quality and higher levels of subjective well-being[26]. Caldwell (2010) found that using exercises such as tai chi, which help to calm the mind and spirit, as a general education class in universities was effective in improving the subjective well-being of college students[25]. Chen Zhangyuan (2015) further explored the mechanism by which physical activity affects subjective well-being and found that physical activity can affect subjective well-being through peer relationships[2]. Adopting healthy behavior habits while enhancing physical activity is also conducive to positively improving subjective well-being.

## 2.4. Summary

In conclusion, subjective well-being is a self-assessment for which there are well-established scales in the academic world. The empirical results on the subjective well-being of college students in China show that emotional factors play a decisive role in the level of college students' subjective well-being, and that individual values and social support indirectly affect subjective well-being by influencing life satisfaction. College students' subjective well-being varies by gender, urban/rural, ethnicity, and grade level, but not by professional background. College students with lower levels of subjective

well-being can improve their subjective well-being by improving their lifestyles, such as improving sleep quality and exercising.

### **3. Research Related to College Student Involution**

#### **3.1. The Concept of Involution and College Students**

"Involution", translated as over densification, intuitively means inward evolution or circling.

Yang Xiuqin (2022) pointed out that "involution" was first proposed in the 18th century by Kant[17], a classical German philosopher, in his book *The Critique of Judgement*, which argued that involution is a process of full evolution, and that after reaching a certain stable state, it still makes itself continuously complex[8]. Liu Shiding (2004) points out that the American anthropologist Alexander Golden Weiser used the term involution to describe a cultural phenomenon of continuous internal refinement in the face of limited external expansion. Subsequently, American anthropologist Clifford Geertz introduced involution theories into the field of sociology[10]. Guo Jiqiang (2007) pointed out that in his study of agriculture in Java, Indonesia, Geertz argued that farmers on the island were constantly increasing their labor inputs in the direction of labor-intensity, but due to diminishing marginal efficiencies, there was a phenomenon of "agricultural involution"[4]. He defines involution as "the phenomenon in which a social or cultural pattern, having reached a definite form at a certain stage of development, stagnates or fails to transform into another advanced pattern." Lu (2022) points out that in the 1980s[11], overseas sinologists Philip C.C. Huang and Prasenjit Duara introduced the theory of involution into China for the study of rural economic development in North China and rural areas in the south of the Yangtze River[3][5]. In 2020, the term "involution" swept across the Internet and resonated with many aspects of society, according to Peng Pai (2020)[6]. Nowadays, the concept of involution has been generalized, and the phenomenon of involution exists in all areas of society, especially in education.

"College students' involution" can be understood as the phenomenon of diminishing marginal benefits of irrational competition in a university environment where resources are limited, and where college students continuously refine and complicate their investment in unit resources in order to maintain their core competitiveness and compete for high-quality resources.

#### **3.2. Main Manifestations and Classification of Involution in College Students**

In recent years, the term "involution" has become quite popular on university campuses. Zhou Xiting (2022) found that with the increasing importance of national education, colleges and universities continue to expand, China's gross enrolment rate in higher education has exceeded 50%, but such as the number of guaranteed places for graduate school, the opportunity to go abroad, scholarships and other high-quality resources are still limited, resulting in order to achieve the same goal, college students can only continue to invest more energy, diminishing marginal efficiency, and fall into a vicious circle of competition[22].

Qin, Xinyuan and Dai, Yuqi (2022) suggest that the phenomenon of involution in universities can be divided into

three main categories: enjoyment involution, utilitarian involution, and hostage involution[12]. The "enjoyment involution" describes a group phenomenon in which individuals voluntarily and actively engage in competition and derive pleasure from it. These individuals usually adapt well to the existing rules and regulations, do not consider themselves to be caught in the vortex of "involution", and are able to maintain an ideal state of dynamic equilibrium. Typical of these individuals are the "slashers", who are multi-skilled, have a variety of professional identities, are willing to experiment with different ways of life and work, and are able to balance their interests with their careers, and in the process realize the diversity of their self-worth. In contrast, there is the "utilitarian involution", these individuals usually participate in competition out of self-interest, with a clear goal orientation, and seek to maximize their personal interests through competition. For example, when teachers set the word count for assignments at 2,000 words, the submitted assignments generally exceeded this requirement, reaching about 5,000 words. Even, the class president of a college modified the assignments of his classmates without permission for the sake of graduate school opportunities. The "hostage-type involution", between "enjoyment-type" and "utilitarian", is manifested in the individual's unconscious "blindly follow the trend" under the pressure of life, study or work. Although this group realizes that excessive competition may bring limited benefits, but there is still nothing they can do about it, investing more resources in return for a worse experience. Involvement because they don't want to lose their competitive edge and fall behind is typical of this group of students, even if they don't recognize it in their hearts.

#### **3.3. Causes of Involution in College Students**

The causes of college students' involution are a complex and multidimensional issue that involves the education system, social competition, cultural values and many other aspects. The following are some of the main reasons.

##### **3.3.1. Uneven Distribution of Educational Resources**

In China, quality educational resources are relatively limited, while the large number of college students makes competition particularly fierce. In order to compete for these limited resources, college students have to put in more effort and time, leading to the phenomenon of involution.

##### **3.3.2. The Driving Force of the Education System and the Competitive Pressures of Society**

In China's education system, the college entrance examination is regarded as a key point for changing one's fate, while university is an important stage leading to success. As a result, college students face tremendous academic and employment pressures and are forced to enhance their competitiveness through constant endeavors. At the same time, society's definitions and expectations of success intensify this competitive atmosphere, making college students more anxious and involuntional.

##### **3.3.3. Impact of Cultural Values**

In some cultures, there is an overemphasis on success, status, and competition, leading to constant introversion in pursuit of these goals. Such values are particularly evident in the college population, which is often expected to excel in a variety of areas, including academics, social interaction and interests, thus exacerbating the phenomenon of involution.

##### **3.3.4. Individual Psychological and Social Expectations**

Many college students may be subject to expectations and

pressures from family, friends, and society to excel in academic employment. Such expectations may lead college students to develop excessive anxiety and a competitive mindset, which in turn leads them to engage in involuntional competition.

The causes of college students' involution are a complex and multifaceted issue, involving multiple aspects such as educational resources, educational system, social competition, cultural values and personal psychology. In order to alleviate this phenomenon, it is necessary to start from multiple angles, including optimizing the allocation of educational resources, reforming the educational system, reducing the pressure of social competition, adjusting cultural values and paying attention to personal psychological health.

According to Liu Yunsuan, "Uncovering the pretty indicators and decent success, these brightest young people in China are facing a universal dilemma: in extreme competition, success overwhelms growth, peers compete with each other, and exhaustion." This quote has touched countless college students and has pointed out the existential dilemma of college students. Lu Xiaowen (2022) points out that young college students give up the original value orientation of seeking truth and pragmatism, pursuing studies in a practical manner and learning for the sake of knowledge, and instead devote themselves to the pursuit of short-term utilitarian high GPAs and fall into endless competition; they make daily preparations for various competitions, internships, graduate studies, or overseas study, which seems to have a full schedule, but in fact, they lack long-term career planning. In short, some young people rely on the ego-driven to achieve a relative advantage in a certain field for a while, and take the fulfilment of their external needs as a criterion, so that the original friendly relationship between classmates gradually evolves into a competitive relationship oriented to interests. Discourses such as "elimination at the end of the line" and "promotion or departure" are constantly hitting the minds of the university community, making them consciously or unconsciously engage in scrambling endeavors[11].

### **3.4. The Impact of College Student Involution**

The impact of the phenomenon of college student involution is multifaceted and manifests itself in the following ways.

#### **3.4.1. The Phenomenon of Involution Has a Negative Impact on the Physical and Mental Health of College Students**

Excessive study pressure and competitive pressure may cause college students to be in a state of prolonged tension and anxiety, and even mental health problems such as insomnia and depression. At the same time, in order to cope with the involution, college students may have to sacrifice rest and recreation time, leading to an imbalance in their lives and adversely affecting their physical health.

#### **3.4.2. The Phenomenon of Involution Limits the Development of Individuality and Creativity of College Students**

In an overly competitive environment, college students tend to pay more attention to the pursuit of scores and rankings, while neglecting their real interests and hobbies. This kind of homogenized way of learning and thinking restricts their innovative ability and personality development, and is not conducive to the development of their comprehensive quality and competitiveness.

#### **3.4.3. The Phenomenon of Involution May Also have a Negative Impact on College Students' Social Skills and Interpersonal Relationships**

In order to cope with the involution, college students may reduce communication and co-operation with others, leading to a decline in social skills. At the same time, excessive competition and comparison may also lead to tension among classmates and affect the harmonious development of interpersonal relationships.

#### **3.4.4. The Phenomenon of Involution Also has an Impact on Educational Equity and Social Stability**

In the context of the involution, the distribution of quality education resources has become more uneven, which may exacerbate social stratification. At the same time, excessive competition and anxiety may also lead to a tense social atmosphere, which is not conducive to social stability and development.

The impact of the phenomenon of college students' involution is all-encompassing, and needs to attract extensive attention and focus. In order to alleviate the phenomenon of involution, it is necessary to start from many aspects, including optimizing the allocation of educational resources, reforming the education system, strengthening mental health education, and improving the comprehensive quality of college students. At the same time, it is also necessary to guide college students to establish correct values and concepts of success, and to avoid excessive pursuit of short-term interests at the expense of long-term development.

It is possible to envisage a model similar to a closed market, where universities and college students play the roles of producer and consumer, respectively, and where quantitative achievements, such as merit points, become the "currency" of the transaction. In the context of resource constraints, competition among college students intensifies. Ideally, consumers should exchange resources fairly through equal amounts of quantitative data, but the phenomenon of endogamy threatens to upset this balance.

Specifically, college students' involution induces undesirable competition through two ways: firstly, involution leads to tense interpersonal relationships between students and restricted information exchange, forming a prisoner's dilemma, which makes one party, in the absence of information about the other party, continuously increase its inputs in order to enhance its competitiveness, resulting in disorderly competition. Secondly, involution may undermine the rules of competition, with some students resorting to means such as data falsification or information monopoly for their personal interests, which violates the principle of fair competition and results in disadvantageous positions for those who abide by the rules. All in all, these two kinds of unhealthy competition will make it possible for students who are truly capable may not receive due recognition, while speculators may gain undue advantage, ultimately leading to the marginalization of outstanding talents, and bad money drives out good money.

### **3.5. Summary**

"Involution", translated as over densification, intuitively means inward evolution or circling. "College students' involution" can be understood as in the case of a certain amount of university resources, in order to fight for high-quality resources, the college students of the unit of resources to the continuous refinement and complexity of the input, thus forming an irrational competition under the phenomenon of

diminishing marginal benefits.

College students' involution is specifically manifested in three categories: enjoyment-type involution, utilitarian involution, and hostage-type involution. Due to the unequal distribution of educational resources, the pressure of the educational system and social competition, the influence of cultural values, personal psychology and social expectations, the phenomenon of college students' involution is prevalent, which has brought many negative impacts to college students.

## 4. Mechanisms of the Effect of Involution on Subjective Well-being

Involving behavior may have a negative impact on an individual's subjective well-being, "the more one involves, the less happy one is". The mechanisms include the following.

### 4.1. Excessive Stress and Anxiety

In an involutorial environment, college students are often under tremendous academic and competitive pressure, and they feel that they must constantly strive to outperform others in order to achieve recognition and success. This constant stress and anxiety can affect an individual's physical and mental health, reduce subjective well-being, and even lead to symptoms of depression and anxiety.

### 4.2. Social Comparison and Self-denial

Relative utility theory suggests that high-level individuals in a low-level whole usually have more subjective well-being than low-level individuals in a high-level whole, even though the latter have an advantage over the former. That is, "happiness is comparative". However, for most college students, the frequent social comparisons, especially upward comparisons, brought about by involutorial behaviors often lead to self-negation, which has a serious negative impact on personal emotions and weakens subjective well-being.

### 4.3. Lack of Fulfilment of Individual Psychological Needs

For college students with involutorial behaviors, they over-pursued external goals and neglected the satisfaction of their self-psychological needs, whereas in order to maintain a high level of subjective well-being, one must satisfy the individual's basic psychological needs. Therefore, even if this group of students finally achieve the external goals they pursue, they will not produce the emotions of pleasure or happiness, and will even feel empty and confused, with a lower level of subjective well-being.

### 4.4. Impaired Social Support and Relationships

The environment of involution may lead to two directions of development of interpersonal relationships, one is that college students reduce communication and cooperation with others in order to cope with involution, their social ability decreases, and because of the competitive relationship leads to tensions among classmates; the other is that it becomes utilitarian and superficial, and the relationships that college students build with others for their own interests lack sincerity and support. However, in either case, the lack of genuine social support and warm interpersonal relationships reduces the subjective well-being and life satisfaction of college students.

In summary, involutorial behaviors may negatively affect

college students' subjective well-being through mechanisms such as increasing stress and anxiety, triggering social comparisons and self-denial, neglecting personal psychological needs, and impairing social support and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, establishing a healthy concept of competition, cultivating inner satisfaction, and searching for true meaning in life are crucial for college students to maintain a high level of subjective well-being.

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