

Research on Structural Shame and Occupational Stereotypes in Youth Career Choice

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Abstract

With the rise of the digital economy and the diversification of employment forms, traditional notions of “decent work” are being redefined. Young people today face growing complexity and pressure in making career choices. This study focuses on the youth group and examines how structural shame and occupational stereotypes jointly shape their moral cognition and career decision-making. Integrating theoretical and situational approaches, the study reveals that shame, as a core emotional experience, plays a crucial role in discouraging young people from pursuing emerging or non-traditional occupations, even when these options offer substantial potential. The findings show that youth career decisions are not purely based on rational analysis but are deeply influenced by emotional burden and cultural internalization. Additionally, the study proposes coping strategies to help reduce the impact of structural shame and calls for more inclusive research that accounts for subgroup differences and the role of digital platforms in reshaping career perceptions.

Keywords

Youth career development, structural shame, occupational stereotypes, moral cognition, emotional socialization.

1. Introduction

In today's society, with the transformation of economic structure and the emergence of emerging industries, the types of occupations are becoming increasingly rich, and the traditional "decent jobs" are being redefined. In the past, people generally believed that high-paying, stable, and high-status occupations were "good jobs" worth pursuing, such as doctors, civil servants, and teachers. With the growth of the digital economy and the rise of flexible employment, a variety of new occupations have emerged, including delivery workers, Internet celebrities, and freelancers. While these roles have expanded career options for young people, they often fail to meet traditional societal standards of professionalism and are frequently labeled as "low-status" and "unstable." As a result, many young individuals face significant pressure and confusion from family, society, and public opinion, forcing them to balance their personal interests with external expectations during their career decision-making process.

In the process of career development, shame, as an emotional experience, has emerged as a significant factor influencing young people's career choices. Many young individuals experience feelings of shame and self-doubt when their decisions diverge from mainstream career paths [1]. This sense of shame is not solely rooted in personal psychology, but is closely tied to the structural evaluation system within society. Public opinion regarding different professions, along with the media's continual portrayal of “successful individuals,” exerts a subtle yet powerful influence on young people's understanding of professional ethics and their self-positioning. However, existing research on professional identity and shame primarily focuses

on individual psychological experiences, often neglecting the broader context of social structures and group dynamics. To address this gap, this study will integrate the concepts of “structural shame” and “professional stereotypes” to explore how they interact in shaping young peoples’ moral cognition. Through both theoretical and empirical approaches, this study will aim to uncover the deeper social dynamics influencing young people's career decisions and provide a new theoretical framework for understanding young people career development and designing effective social support systems

2. The Generation Mechanism of Youth Moral Cognition

2.1. Non-completely Rational Career Cognition

When faced with career choices, young people often do not make decisions based entirely on rational analysis. Although modern society encourages career planning based on interests, abilities and market demand, in fact, emotional experience and social norms play an extremely important role in the formation of young people moral cognition. In the process of growing up, young people not only passively accept career information, but also feel praise, criticism, expectations and pressure in various social relationships and interactions. When young people consider choosing some professions with low social evaluation or not recognized by the mainstream, they are prone to complex emotions such as shame, anxiety and worry [2]. These emotional reactions will directly affect their moral judgment of certain professions and their recognition of self-worth.

Social norms are also invisibly shaping young people's career cognition [3]. Young people often internalize the expectations of their families, schools and society for "decent professions" and regard external recognition as an important criterion for measuring the value of professions. Even if they are passionate about a certain profession, if the profession is regarded as "undignified" or "not up to standard", young people may still choose to give up. It can be said that the formation of young people's professional ethics cognition is the result of the combined effect of emotional drive and norm internalization. Rational decision-making only dominates in certain situations. Most of the time, young people make career choices and moral judgments under complex social situations and emotional pressure.

2.2. Synergy of Family, Society and Media

The formation of young people moral cognition is a multidimensional and systematic social process. Among them, family, society and media are the three key forces that influence young peoples' career concepts and moral judgments. Family is the first classroom for young people socialization. Parents and relatives often instill implicit judgments about which professions are considered "decent" and which professions are considered "shameful" through words and deeds. This early career socialization is usually highly emotional. Since childhood, many people have been repeatedly told that professions such as civil servants and doctors are ideal and promising. Over time, this information has contributed to the internalization of socially constructed occupational hierarchies and normative expectations. The social evaluation system further strengthens this stratification. In real life, social evaluation methods such as academic discrimination, occupational rankings, and salary lists are endless, which invisibly divide occupations into "three, six, and nine levels." According to the data of "Annual Average Wage of Urban Unit Employees in 2023" released by the National Bureau of Statistics, the annual average wage in the financial industry is 177,544 yuan, the information transmission, software and information technology service industry is 161,352 yuan, and the accommodation and catering industry is only 59,309 yuan [4]. This significant salary gap not only reflects the difference in economic returns between occupations, but also forms a preference for high-

paying industries in social evaluation, which further affects young people's career choices and moral cognition.

Media communication also contributes to the formation of occupational stereotypes. Both mainstream media and online public opinion tend to highlight the success stories of certain industries, while emerging, flexible and even challenging occupations are often retained or even belittled. The "role model stories" on social media strengthen the sense of superiority of mainstream occupations, make young people more concerned about the perspective of the outside world, and strengthen the standards of "right and wrong" and "high and low" in moral cognition [5]. For instance, on platforms like Xiaohongshu (RED), influencer-generated content frequently glamorizes high-paying, urban-based jobs, reinforcing a narrative where success is narrowly defined. These "role model stories" contribute to the glorification of select career paths, intensifying young people's desire for social approval and reinforcing a binary between "good" and "inferior" professions in moral cognition.

2.3. Biological and Cultural Adaptation of Moral Cognition

In addition to the influence of socialisation, the emergence of young people moral cognition also has a dual basis of evolution and cultural adaptation. From a biological perspective, moral norms and collective identity are adaptive mechanisms formed by humans in the long-term evolution process [6]. Early humans relied on group cooperation to improve their survival rate, so abiding by "norms" and feeling ashamed of deviating from group expectations became an important psychological mechanism to maintain group stability. In the process of growing up, young peoples' sensitivity to social norms and moral standards largely stems from this biological evolutionary inheritance. Cultural internalization further enriches and refines the content of moral cognition. Different social cultures have different definitions of "decent professions", but these concepts are constantly strengthened and solidified through intergenerational inheritance and social practice. Under the influence of the cultural atmosphere, young peoples gradually identify with the mainstream society's occupational evaluation standards and internalize them as the basis for self-evaluation and moral judgment. Occupational stereotypes are also transmitted across generations through cultural adaptation, shaping young people's perceptions of which professions are considered 'valuable' or 'worthless'.

3. The Path of Occupational Stereotypes

3.1. Emotional Path

Under the influence of occupational stereotypes, shame becomes an extremely strong emotional driving force in the process of young people's career choice. Young people often avoid relevant positions because some occupations are widely labeled as "low decency" and "insecure" by society, even if these occupations can provide considerable economic benefits or personal growth space. This "escape" is not a purely rational decision, but a self-protection mechanism derived from emotions. For example, even if occupations such as "delivery man" and "live broadcast celebrity" have strong market demand and salary attractiveness, many young people would rather bear the pressure of employment than get involved in them because of the lack of social recognition and easy to be questioned or ridiculed by relatives and friends. The root of this sense of shame is that society generally distinguishes between high and low occupations and makes value judgments in open or implicit ways. Young people repeatedly receive similar information in the process of growing up, and gradually regard "decency" and "respect" as the main considerations for career selection. When the career choice is not recognized by the mainstream, young people will worry about "losing face" and "not being respected", which will cause psychological avoidance and repression [1]. This emotional path

strengthens the intergenerational transmission of occupational stereotypes, making it easier for young people to retreat when facing emerging occupations, limiting their space for exploration and self-realization. It can be seen that shame plays a key "negative guidance" role in career choice and moral cognition through the emotional path.

3.2. Cognitive Path

In the process of career choice, young people are not only driven by emotions, but also weigh the tension between social norms and self-realization at the rational level. On the one hand, social norms convey the standards of "good careers" through multiple channels such as parents, peers, and public opinion, emphasizing traditional values such as stability, decency, and high income. These norms have become an important basis for young people to evaluate whether their choices are "correct" [7]. On the other hand, with the gradual opening of social concepts, more and more young people have begun to pay attention to self-interest, value realization, and personal growth, hoping to express themselves and realize their ideals through careers.

However, when self-interest conflicts with mainstream social standards, young people often face a difficult dilemma. For instance, some may have a passion for art, sports, or emerging technology fields, yet due to the lack of social recognition or institutional support for these careers, pursuing them often involves enduring greater social pressure and a higher risk of being labeled as having "failed." As a result, young people constantly weigh the trade-off between social approval and personal fulfillment, and may ultimately choose to sacrifice their ideals in exchange for societal validation. This internal tension within their moral and professional cognition leads to contradictions and anxiety—they strive to remain authentic, yet fear straying from societal expectations. This struggle not only heightens the psychological burden associated with career decisions, but also urges society to reconsider and reform the value system surrounding professional diversity.

4. Cross-Cultural Analysis of Occupational Stereotypes and Youth Moral Cognition

The influence of occupational stereotypes on youth varies significantly across cultural contexts. In Eastern cultures, particularly those rooted in collectivism and strong familial ties such as China, South Korea, and Japan, family and societal expectations play a dominant role in shaping career choices. In these cultures, a "respectable profession" is not only seen as a path to personal success but also as a reflection of family honor and social prestige. Career choices like becoming a civil servant, doctor, or entering a state-owned enterprise are often regarded as ideal because they align with long-standing cultural ideals of stability, respectability, and upward mobility. In such settings, young people may experience shame not primarily due to personal failure, but because of their inability to meet the collective expectations imposed by family and society. This structural form of shame limits the space for individual autonomy and self-expression in professional decision-making.

In contrast, Western cultures, particularly those in North America and Northern Europe, place a greater emphasis on individualism, personal fulfillment, and self-actualization. Youth in these societies are encouraged to pursue careers based on personal interests, strengths, and aspirations. They often view work as an essential means of realizing one's identity and life purpose. Societal attitudes tend to show greater tolerance for non-traditional or emerging careers such as freelance creatives or digital entrepreneurs. For example, the popular practice of taking a "Gap Year," which is a deliberate break between high school and university or work, reflects Western youth's focus on exploration, self-discovery, and growth outside conventional career paths [8]. This period is often used for travel, volunteering, or internships and may not immediately lead to a traditional career but is valued for broadening horizons and personal

development. While occupational stereotypes still exist, with prestige often attached to high-paying jobs in law or finance, the shame associated with career choice tends to be more internalized and individualized. Rather than being judged for failing to meet family expectations, Western youth may feel inadequate for not achieving personal goals or perceived competence. This reflects a different psychological source of moral tension.

These cross-cultural differences shape not only the mechanisms behind youth moral cognition but also how occupational stereotypes are socially constructed and internalized. Although globalization and cultural exchange have blurred some of these traditional boundaries, the roles that family, society, and media play in influencing youth career choices remain culturally specific. In collectivist cultures, the moral weight of disappointing one's family may outweigh personal desires, while in individualist societies the burden often comes from failing to live up to one's internal standards or the entrepreneurial ideal.

5. Suggestions

Faced with the pressure of structural shame and occupational stereotypes, young people should achieve a balance in their occupational identity through self-regulation and social support mechanisms. First, the adjustment of personal values has become an important strategy for young people to coordinate the conflict between social norms and self-expectations. In fact, many young people now no longer use the social recognition of "decent occupations" as the only criterion when choosing a career, but try to combine interests, abilities and conditions, emphasizing the creativity, freedom and personal growth space of the occupation. In addition, some young people redefine "success" from a multi-perspective perspective, pay more attention to the social significance of work and self-realization, thereby alleviating shame and forming a career identity compatible with personal ideals. Secondly, young people should cultivate contextual reasoning ability and flexibly respond to the pressure of career selection in different social and economic environments. It is recommended that young people reasonably set short-term and long-term career goals based on their own economic conditions and family support. In the short term, they can give priority to occupations with higher social recognition to accumulate resources, and in the long term, they can gradually transform to interest-driven or ideal occupations, dynamically balance reality and ideals, and alleviate psychological conflicts. Finally, it is emphasized to build a sound social support network and give full play to the role of multiple support systems such as family, school, peers and workplace mentors. Families should provide understanding and support to alleviate shame, schools and educational institutions need to strengthen career planning and psychological counseling services, and social circles should become an important platform for sharing experiences and establishing positive career values.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals that young people's career choices are profoundly influenced by the interplay of structural shame and occupational stereotypes, which are shaped by family expectations, societal norms, and media representations. The findings highlight that youth moral cognition regarding professions is not solely based on rational deliberation but deeply embedded in emotional experiences and cultural internalization. In particular, the emotional burden of shame leads many young individuals to avoid emerging or non-traditional occupations despite potential benefits, while cognitive tensions between social approval and personal fulfillment create persistent dilemmas in career decision-making. Moreover, the cross-cultural comparison highlights how collectivist and individualist societies impose different forms of moral expectations on youth, shaping the emotional sources of shame and

internal conflict. This research also puts forward coping strategies to address pressures from structural shame and occupational stereotypes.

However, this study has certain limitations. The focus on the macro-level social and cultural factors may overlook the nuanced experiences of individuals within subgroups, such as differences by gender, socioeconomic status, or specific local contexts. Future research should aim to address these gaps by incorporating more diverse and longitudinal methodologies to track the developmental trajectory of youth career cognition under evolving economic conditions. Moreover, exploring the role of emerging digital platforms and new forms of employment in reshaping occupational stereotypes and reducing structural shame could offer practical implications for career guidance and policy.

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