

The Formation Mechanism of Involution in Chinese Family Education from the Perspective of Comparison Psychology and Its Negative Impacts on Children's Social Relationship Development

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Abstract

The involution phenomenon in the field of family education in contemporary China has become a widely discussed educational and social issue. It is characterized by low-level homogeneous competition, irrational investment in educational resources, and the widespread prevalence of parental educational anxiety. This study takes parental comparison psychology as the core entry point, employing literature research and logical analysis methods, and drawing on relevant theories such as social comparison theory, positive psychology, and developmental psychology. It analyzes the formation mechanism by which comparison psychology drives the involution of family education and explores the multiple adverse effects of the resulting over-parenting behaviors on the establishment and development of children's subsequent social relationships. The study finds that parental comparison psychology is the core psychological driver of involution in family education. It is jointly propelled by multiple factors at the social-cultural, family structural, individual cognitive, and school behavioral levels. The high-expectation, high-investment, and high-anxiety parenting model it triggers hinders the healthy development of children's social relationships in terms of self-cognition, social skills, and mental health. Based on these findings, this study proposes preliminary coping strategies from the three levels of society, family, and school, aiming to provide theoretical references and practical insights for alleviating parental comparison psychology, breaking the involution of family education, and promoting children's social development.

Keywords

involution, comparison psychology, children's social relationships, parenting model

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the intensification of social competition and the deepening of parents' attention to education, Chinese family education has exhibited a clear trend of involution. Contemporary families are investing increasingly more in education, with various forms of family education—such as extracurricular tutoring, preschool classes, transitional education between academic stages, and college entrance planning—becoming important components of family life. However, this high level of investment has not yielded

commensurate high returns. Instead, it has resulted in a low-level competitive state in which everyone's efforts amount to no real advantage, commonly referred to as an involution state. In the context of Chinese family education, involution manifests as a "three-high" parenting model characterized by high expectations, high investment, and high anxiety. These phenomena are closely related to parents' comparison psychology in the process of their children's education. Parents tend to horizontally compare various aspects of their children's development—especially academic performance—with other children, such as relatives' or neighbors' children or classmates. This comparison generates anxiety, blind conformity, and irrational competitive behaviors, which further exacerbate the degree of involution in family education and bring numerous negative impacts on children's physical and mental development as well as their social growth. Against this background, analyzing the causes of involution in family education from the perspective of comparison psychology and exploring its impact on children's social relationships is of significant practical relevance.

This study aims to take comparison psychology as the entry point to analyze its intrinsic relationship with the involution of family education, enrich the research system on the causes of family education involution, and provide a new perspective for the application of positive psychology in family education research. As stated, "How family education is conducted is related to the lifelong development of children, the vital interests of thousands of families, and the future of the country and the nation" [1]. At the same time, family education serves as the first classroom for children's growth and directly affects their physical and mental health and social abilities. By explaining the influence of comparison psychology on the involution of family education, this study reveals the irrational nature of comparison psychology, helping parents establish scientific and rational family education models, adopt reasonable educational behaviors conducive to children's growth, create educational environments favorable to children's healthy development, and promote the development of children's social interaction skills and interpersonal relationship management abilities, thereby laying a solid foundation for their future integration into society.

2. Definition of Core Concepts

Involution in Family Education: Involution originally refers to a phenomenon in which a social or cultural pattern, after reaching a certain determined form at a particular stage of development, stagnates or fails to transform into a higher-order mode. In this study, involution in family education specifically refers to the state in which parents, under the pressure of educational competition, fall into low-level, homogeneous, and irrational competition within the field of family education.

Parental Comparison Psychology: This refers to the psychological state in which parents, during the process of their children's education, horizontally compare various aspects of their own child's development—including academic performance, special talents, and overall qualities—with those of other children (with academic performance being the most critical comparison item), thereby triggering feelings of anxiety, unease, or even envy and jealousy.

3. Manifestations of Involution in Family Education

Involution in family education is not an abstract concept but manifests through concrete behaviors, including irrational and excessive investment in education, the widespread adoption of the "three-high" parenting model, and the normalization of over-parenting behaviors.

3.1 Irrational Investment in Educational Resources

Parents, in an effort to gain an advantage for their children in educational competition, engage in an "arms race" regarding educational resource allocation. Investment in educational resources occurs in two main aspects. On one hand, in order to improve their children's academic performance, parents blindly enroll their children in various tutoring classes, advanced training classes, and transitional classes between different academic stages, creating a dual learning burden of both in-school and after-school education. Maintaining this state naturally requires substantial resources. Data show that in Beijing, the annual expenditure on interest classes for children in middle-class families reaches 120,000 RMB; family education expenditure in

first-tier cities accounts for 28.7% of total household spending; and the number of registrations for science and technology innovation competitions has surged by 300% [2].

On the other hand, in the pursuit of improving children's overall qualities, parents disregard their children's natural talents and personal interests, enrolling them in interest classes such as calligraphy, painting, dance, and programming, hoping to mold their children into "all-round talents" with multiple skills. However, such investments instead increase children's academic and life burdens, leading to regression in both academic performance and overall development. As a result, parents' resource investment yields not only no actual benefits but also negative effects, which in turn heightens parental anxiety and prompts further increases in investment. This creates a vicious cycle of "the more investment, the greater the anxiety," thereby intensifying the involution of family education.

3.2 Widespread Adoption of the "Three-High" Parenting Model

The "three-high" parenting model in Chinese family education—characterized by high expectations, high investment, and high anxiety—has its core psychological driver in parental comparison psychology. Sources of high expectations include both horizontal comparisons with other children and vertical comparisons with parents' own past. On one hand, parents demand that their children surpass their perceived competitors in academic performance or overall qualities. On the other hand, parents with lower educational attainment expect their children to achieve the academic heights they once aspired to but failed to reach, while highly educated parents hope their children will reach or even exceed their own level of achievement.

Survey data indicate that parents with graduate or undergraduate degrees have significantly higher expectations for their children's academic achievement compared to those with high school education or below. Maternal education level is positively correlated with expectations for children's education; 92.3% of mothers with graduate or undergraduate degrees expect their children to attend key high schools or universities, far exceeding the 67.8% among mothers with high school education or below [3]. The combination of these two factors leads parents to set excessively high demands that often exceed their children's actual capabilities, prompting large investments of time, money, and energy. However, because these expectations surpass children's limits, children frequently fail to meet them, which triggers parental anxiety. This high anxiety, in turn, further drives higher expectations and greater investment, forming a closed loop of the "three-high" model and becoming a defining feature of family education involution.

3.3 Normalization of Over-Parenting Behaviors

Under the influence of comparison psychology, parents invest not only money but also their own energy. Excessive investment of energy leads to the normalization of over-parenting behaviors, including helicopter parenting, intensive mothering, and doing things on behalf of the child. In order to ensure that children develop in the direction predetermined by parents, parents exert comprehensive control over their children's learning, daily life, and social interactions, hovering around them like helicopters—hence the term "helicopter parenting." In some families, mothers become the central figures responsible for their children's education, comprehensively planning their developmental paths, and even sacrificing their own career development and physical and mental health, resulting in the abnormal parenting pattern known as intensive mothering.

A nationwide survey of 1,875 adults revealed that 72.4% of respondents reported that their parents had imposed excessive control during their upbringing, with 12.1% stating that their parents "controlled everything." Parental control was concentrated in areas such as daily habits (52.5%), sleep and wake schedules (43.9%), and career/academic planning (37.6%). Moreover, 66.3% of respondents felt psychologically burdened due to excessive parental control, and 64.5% believed that such behavior hindered the formation of an independent personality [4]. The essence of these over-parenting behaviors is excessive parental intervention in children's development driven by comparison psychology. Such behaviors not only trap parents in educational fatigue and anxiety but also deprive children of space for autonomous development, serving as concrete manifestations of involution in family education.

4. Mechanisms by Which Comparison Psychology Promotes Involution in Family Education

Parental comparison psychology is not a purely spontaneous psychological behavior but results from the combined effects of social, familial, and individual factors.

4.1 Social Level

The promotion of collectivist culture and the social evaluation system serves as a driving force behind comparison psychology. China is a typical collectivist culture, in which individuals are responsible not only for themselves but also for the collectives to which they belong. Consequently, a child's development represents not only the child's own growth but also the development of the entire family. Parents achieve a sense of family success through their children's excellence, while a child's failure is often regarded as the family's failure. In this cultural context, parents invest in education not merely for their children's personal development but also to realize family honor and value. Children's academic performance, overall qualities, and future career trajectories become key indicators for comparison between families. "In China's collectivist cultural background, children's success constitutes an important component of parents' sense of self-worth; setbacks in children's academic performance threaten the values parents cherish, thereby triggering anxiety and irrational competitive behaviors" [5].

In addition, the singular evaluation system provides a concrete benchmark for parental comparison. China's current educational evaluation system remains centered on academic performance and admission outcomes. The score-oriented evaluation standard reduces children's originally complex development into easily quantifiable and comparable indicators such as scores, rankings, and school prestige, thereby facilitating direct comparisons among parents.

4.2 Family Level

The 4+2+1 family structure and the intergenerational transmission of anxiety are the primary drivers of comparison psychology. First, according to a social survey, nuclear families consisting of a couple and one child account for 64.3% of households in China, while households with three or fewer members account for 70.2%. This structure has become the mainstream in urban families and lays the foundation for the 4+2+1 family structure among post-2000 and post-2010 generations. This proportion has continued to rise over the subsequent decade [6]. Under this family structure, the child becomes the core of the family, bearing the expectations of multiple elders including grandparents, maternal grandparents, and parents. Consequently, parents naturally compare their child's development with that of other children in order to live up to these expectations. At the same time, the 4+2+1 structure enables the concentration of the entire family's resources on a single child, providing a material foundation for parents' irrational educational investment.

Second, parents tend to transfer the anxiety they experience in social competition to the next generation, transforming it into anxiety about their children's education. Contemporary parents themselves face numerous pressures in academics, careers, and daily life. Such pressure leads them to believe that "competition today is even fiercer, and children must be more outstanding than others to gain a foothold in future society." This mindset transforms their own anxiety into excessively high expectations and demands for their children, driving efforts to enhance children's "competitiveness" through comparison with others. In addition, parents commonly exhibit a "compensation mentality." A social survey found that over 80% of parents believed they had "sacrificed their personal development for their children," and 69.2% explicitly stated that they would entrust their unrealized educational and career aspirations to their children in hopes of "making up for life's regrets." Compared with parents without such compensation psychology, this group showed 37.5 and 42.1 percentage points higher rates of extracurricular class enrollment and upward comparison behavior in education, respectively [7]. This compensation psychology further intensifies parental comparison psychology and triggers irrational educational behaviors.

4.3 School Level

Schools' shifting of responsibility serves as an important catalyst and channel for fostering comparison psychology. Some schools assign check-in homework via WeChat groups and require parents to correct assignments and print materials. These practices transfer educational responsibilities that should belong to the school onto parents, forcing parents to constantly monitor group messages and even tutor their children in subjects where their own knowledge may be insufficient. This further heightens parental anxiety and

invisibly provides a platform for comparison. When parents observe the quality of other parents' check-ins in WeChat groups, their comparison psychology is amplified, leading them to set excessively high demands on themselves and their children regarding homework quality and quantity. Relevant surveys show that over 60% of parents reported experiencing anxiety due to school-required WeChat check-ins and homework correction tasks, and 47.3% admitted that they engaged in comparison with other parents' performance, which in turn led to irrational increases in educational demands on their children [8]. The inability to meet these high demands then generates even greater anxiety, forming a vicious cycle of comparison—*anxiety*—further comparison—*further anxiety*, thereby intensifying educational involution.

4.4 Individual Level

Deviations in parents' self-perception and social comparison cognition constitute the internal causes of comparison psychology. First, some parents exhibit biases in self-perception by linking their children's development directly to the realization of their own self-worth. Under this cognition, the child is no longer an independent individual but becomes a tool for parents to achieve life value and self-worth, as well as a medium through which parents prove their educational competence. Whether self-worth is realized is judged through comparison with other children. This deviation in self-cognition traps parents in the misconception of "educating children for themselves," which gives rise to and continuously reinforces comparison psychology.

Second, classic social comparison theory posits that when individuals lack objective evaluation standards, they use others as reference points. This process is not entirely rational; individuals have an inherent drive for "upward comparison," which easily leads to evaluation biases in pursuit of being "superior to others," laying the foundation for subsequent cognitive distortions [9]. In the context of family education comparisons, this manifests as parents being more inclined to focus on other children who outperform their own, leading to the erroneous cognition that "if other people's children can achieve it, my child must also achieve it." Furthermore, mutual influence among parents reinforces these cognitive biases, creating the mentality of "everyone else is comparing, so I must compare too," ultimately leading to irrational educational competition and driving the formation of involution in family education.

5. Adverse Effects of Involution in Family Education on the Development of Children's Social Relationships

The "three-high" education model and unhealthy parenting behaviors caused by parental comparison psychology not only bring anxiety to parents but also exert adverse effects on children's physical and mental development, particularly exerting negative impacts on the development of children's social relationships and hindering the establishment of healthy social relationships with others during childhood and into adulthood.

At the cognitive level, it leads to deviations in children's self-cognition. The family environment has a significant influence on the formation of children's self-cognition. On one hand, in the process of continuous effort without being able to meet parental expectations, children are highly prone to developing low self-esteem and low self-efficacy. They come to believe that no matter how hard they try, they cannot achieve actual results, leading to doubts about their own abilities. Surveys show that children who are frequently denied by their parents with comments such as "not working hard enough" experience a 63% decline in learning confidence, and over 70% develop the negative cognition that "effort is useless." Among them, the proportion of primary school children whose self-efficacy is impaired reaches 81.2%, significantly higher than that in junior and senior high school stages [10]. On the other hand, parental comparison psychology is also transmitted to children, causing them to base their sense of self-worth on surpassing others. This makes them focus more on competition rather than cooperation in social interactions, making it more difficult to establish interpersonal relationships and form genuine emotional connections with others.

At the competence level, it restricts the development of children's social skills. Children's social skills include the ability to communicate and cooperate with others, resolve conflicts, and lead groups. However, over-parenting behaviors triggered by parental comparison psychology deprive children of opportunities to practice these skills during childhood. First, parents' comprehensive scheduling of learning activities limits children's ability to interact with peers, thereby restricting their capacity for communication and cooperation.

Second, in helicopter parenting, parents provide all-round “escort” services and handle all conflicts for their children, preventing children from developing conflict-resolution abilities. For example, in social conflicts, 42% of parents solve all social conflicts on behalf of their children, and 27% directly contact the other child’s parents to intervene [11]. Third, over-parenting causes children to lack the ability to handle problems independently, make autonomous decisions, and develop a sense of responsibility, thereby inhibiting the development of leadership skills. Surveys indicate that 37% of primary and secondary school students exhibit significant social barriers, representing a 218% increase compared to five years ago. Among them, 62% of children with social barriers come from families with over-parenting or excessive control behaviors. These children score significantly lower than ordinary children in core social skills such as peer cooperation and conflict resolution [12].

At the psychological level, it triggers psychological problems in children and may even lead to mental disorders. On one hand, parents’ anxiety is transmitted to children. Low self-efficacy easily leads to depressive emotions. At the same time, heavy academic pressure leaves children with little time to self-regulate these negative emotions. The tense family atmosphere created by parental comparison psychology places greater psychological pressure on children, ultimately resulting in irritability, anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues. According to a survey by the Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, adolescents from families with high parental anxiety and high academic pressure have a depression risk of 46.2%, which is 5.6 times higher than that of ordinary families. When parent-child psychological communication is lacking, the high-risk rates for adolescent depression and anxiety reach 18% and 30%, respectively; these rates drop to 1.3% and 5.0% when communication is frequent [13]. Such psychological problems make it difficult for children to regulate their emotions in social interactions, thereby exacerbating social conflicts. On the other hand, parents’ neglect of children’s interests and personal strengths while implementing excessive control compresses children’s intrinsic motivation, leading to the psychological issue known as “hollow disease.” “Its core lies in the lack of values, loss of sense of meaning, and confusion in self-identity; controlling parenting, excessive expectations, and deprivation of autonomy are important family causes” [14]. These unhealthy behaviors make it difficult for children to establish stable and healthy social relationships, laying hidden dangers for greater social conflicts in the future and affecting long-term social stability.

6. Preliminary Strategies for Alleviating Comparison Psychology and Addressing Involution in Family Education

Involution in family education is a widespread social phenomenon, and parental comparison psychology is likewise a common psychological phenomenon that requires joint efforts from society, schools, and families.

At the social level: optimize the educational ecosystem and weaken external causes of comparison. Social governance entities should take measures including regulating the education and training market, curbing marketing practices that provoke educational anxiety, and promoting scientific parenting concepts through media and community campaigns. Efforts should guide society to abandon the “score-only” mindset and emphasize children’s individual development. For example, the Family Education Promotion Law of the People’s Republic of China enacted in 2021 is an effective legislative measure to regulate family education. In addition, Shengsi County in Zhejiang Province abolished the selective function of the high school entrance examination, implemented universal promotion of junior high graduates to regular senior high schools, and simultaneously introduced measures such as tiered class teaching and integration of general and vocational education. These initiatives have reconstructed the local educational ecosystem and effectively alleviated parents’ anxiety over upward comparison in school admissions [15].

At the school level: clarify responsibilities between home and school and strengthen conceptual guidance. On one hand, schools need to clearly define the division of responsibilities between home and school, reducing practices that shift school responsibilities onto parents, such as WeChat group check-ins and requiring parents to correct homework. Schools can hold parent meetings and negotiate with parent representatives to jointly delineate responsibility boundaries. On the other hand, schools can popularize rational parenting knowledge through parent meetings and parenting lectures, guide parents to establish correct views on education and talent cultivation, address parents’ confusions in a timely manner, and

alleviate educational anxiety. For instance, Jincheng No. 2 Middle School in Shanxi Province, in collaboration with the local Women's Federation and Education Bureau, organized large-scale public welfare lectures on family education. Experts were invited to provide scientific parenting guidance, helping parents define parent-child responsibility boundaries, alleviate educational anxiety, and abandon comparison-based education, which elicited widespread resonance among parents [16].

At the family level: establish rational concepts and break the internal causes of comparison. Parents should proactively learn scientific parenting knowledge and positive psychology principles, recognize the irrational nature of comparison psychology and its harms to themselves and their children, and learn to accept their children's individual development. They should focus on regulating their own mindset, free themselves from the pursuit of so-called "face," and readjust their self-perception by viewing children as independent individuals rather than deeply tying children's personal development to their own life value, thereby getting rid of blind comparison psychology.

7. Conclusion and Prospects

This study takes parental comparison psychology as the entry point to analyze its important role in the formation of involution in family education and explores its adverse effects on children's social development, leading to the following core conclusions: First, parental comparison psychology is the core psychological driver behind the formation of involution in Chinese family education. Driven by comparison psychology, Chinese family education exhibits the involution characteristics of irrational investment in educational resources, widespread adoption of the "three-high" parenting model, and normalization of over-parenting behaviors. Second, social, familial, individual, and school factors collectively contribute to the formation of parental comparison psychology. Collectivist social culture and the singular educational evaluation system provide the social soil for comparison psychology; the 4+2+1 family structure and intergenerational transmission of parental anxiety serve as motivational factors; parents' cognitive biases constitute the internal cause; and schools' shifting of responsibility acts as a catalyst and channel. Third, parental comparison psychology adversely affects children's growth in terms of self-cognition, social skills development, and mental health. Fourth, alleviating parental comparison psychology and breaking the involution of family education requires coordinated efforts from society, families, and schools.

This study mainly relies on literature research and logical analysis methods and lacks support from empirical research data. It did not obtain actual data on parental comparison psychology, family education behaviors, or children's social relationship development through questionnaires, interviews, or other means. In future research, social surveys can be introduced to collect real data via questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and case analyses to enhance the persuasiveness of the research conclusions. At the same time, age-specific targeted studies can be conducted, combining the characteristics of social development of children at different stages (such as early childhood, primary school, and junior high school), to analyze the differential impacts of parental comparison psychology on children's social relationship development across age groups and propose more targeted coping strategies.

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