

# The Transformation and Utilization of Non-material Resources by First-Generation College Students

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## ABSTRACT

The growth issues of first-generation college students have always been a focus of attention. This study delves into the subtle interactions and relationships that underlie the non-material resources, encompassing moral emotions and other intrinsic elements associated with the self, which are predicated upon material capital. Through the interpretation of the significance of case study and textual analysis method, we have uncovered the value of immaterial resources as “potential” in some sense, manifesting as an integration of the values of multi-dimensional interconnection and self-subjectivity. The study outlines actionable strategies to help first-generation college students utilize non-material resources across three distinct dimensions: family communication, cultural reinvestment, and self-regenerative capacity.

## KEYWORDS

First-generation College Students; Non-materiality Resources; Latent Potential; Moral Emotions.

## 1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

First-generation college students are individuals whose parents have not obtained a higher education degree, and for the purposes of this discussion, they will be referred to as “first-generation”[1]. In 2022, the national gross enrollment rate for higher education reached 59%, with the proportion of “first-generation” exceeded 70%[2]. This indicates an unprecedented and rapid expansion of higher education, leading to its gradual popularization. It also signifies that “first-generation” remain a persistent focus within the field of higher education research.

Reflecting the actual conditions in China and the insights from academic research, the term “children of the poor achieving eminence” is utilized to investigate issues of educational equity and social mobility. This concept, particularly emphasized by Meng Cheng, delves into the cultural production and unique character that facilitate exceptional academic outcomes among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds[3]. In terms of parental educational expectations, Heni Xiong found that the lack of ideal content for children, reflecting the communication conflicts and the gradual weakening of self-awareness between contemporary college students and their parents within family relationships[4]. Since 2021, China has further required an enhanced focus on the construction of “family education and family ethos”. Research has consistently demonstrated that parents exert a profound influence on the holistic development of adolescents by word and example, who first encounter them as their primary social unit[5]. In sociology, functionalism and conflict theory view education as the source of social integration and class solidification, respectively. The ascribed factors influenced by family continue to widen the gap between lower-class and upper-middle-class students. Furthermore, the disparities in the manner in which first-generation and non-first-generation college students engage with academic, familial, and peer support systems serve to exacerbate this gap[6].

Current literature tends to focus more on the construction of teaching quality in universities and the impact of material resources on first-generation college students, their academic performance, choices for further education, and employment. In contrast, Meng Cheng has paid attention to the moral emotions and cultural shocks inherent in the students' own positions, which are often hidden behind their overt behaviors[3].

In recent years, “materiality” has become a popular term in academic research. Media scholar Plotnick has summarized research tendencies that are worth reflecting on by synthesizing the perspectives of various scholars on “materiality research”, including the artificial separation of the relationship between materiality and non-materiality[7]. The concept of “non-materiality”, which appears as an opposite, generally denotes things without a material carrier, such as spirit, consciousness, emotion, language, etc. It represents a creative activity and its crystallization within the spiritual domain that starts from special properties and values, and thus it still has material reality. Li Man introduced the concept of “non-material resource elements” into the research on the future evolution path of modern service industries using the economic concept of “material production”. She pointed out that non-material resource elements “are not the material production elements of things, but refer to organizational resource elements, human resource elements, and information technology resource elements, etc., which are based on non-material resources such as knowledge, information, technology, human resources, and systems”[8]. Combining Plotnick's views, this study focuses on “non-materiality resources”, which encompass certain factors and the potential possibilities that occur under their influence, rather than the structural and artificially manipulable characteristics implied in the term “elements”. Hence, “non-materiality resources” here refer to various substances that exist in a non-material form, with special properties and values, integrated into the framework of Marx's dialectical materialism.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

The primary method used is textual analysis, which involves organizing and comparing textual perspectives on the growth mechanisms of first-generation college students from both domestic and international research. Based on this, the study forms its own viewpoints.

There exists controversy over the representative of case studies in the moral, emotional, and cultural fields of “first-generation”, which starts from social changes to explore latent factors or mechanisms that have not been identified within existing theoretical frameworks. In this study, guided by Weber's hermeneutic approach on the basis of empirical data collection, the aim is to uncover the social regularity mechanisms behind individual randomness through the interpretation of the meaning of the acting subject. According to Schutz's research methods of “Life-World” and “personal life history”, an individual's “life history” is an accumulation process that is imbued with various types of knowledge associated with social life in everyday experiences[9]. Individuals will attach the subjective construction of the “self” to their narratives during in-depth interviews. After the researcher grasps the individual's meaning interpretation, they can capture the interplay between the two selves (the narrator and the researcher) and society. Amidst complexity, there exists a dynamic interplay of integration and separation, revealing the “latent” by examining the minutiae to gain insights into the broader perspective. There are hidden clues as well as the “intangible” beyond the clues, which the author summarizes as “latent potential”.

## **3. “LATENT POTENTIAL EXPLORATION” CENTERED ON THE SELF**

Up to this point, we have identified two elements that will be discussed: “the self” and “latent potential”. By contrasting the deductive reasoning of the Western logical system with the characteristics of Chinese logic, there is always a “rational assumption” in research, which implies that there are “unanticipated consequences”[10] at every step of the research process. Different from

this result-oriented implication, “latent potential” refers to the procedural unique properties or values that emerge from the interaction between the subjective agency of human action and the objective passivity of things. Thus, there is both an objective collection of “latent potential” and the subjective “connections” between them. This duality indirectly prompts a critical inquiry: whether various factors exist in a two-dimensional parallel relationship or a multi-dimensional interlinked network?

### **3.1. “Latent Potential” in the Multi-dimensional Interlinked Network**

“Parallel relationships” can be used to analyze the causes, impacts, and response strategies of an event or the emergence of a phenomenon from different aspects, fields, and perspectives. This reflects the objectivity, comprehensiveness, and scientific rigor of thinking or research. For example, the problems arising from family education on the growth of adolescents are connected to the relationship between skills, goals, habits, and socialization from four aspects: the socialization process of vocational skills, the socialization of social goals, the socialization of social skills, and the derailing of behavioral habits[5]. Within this, there exists an underlying assumption that when diverse factors interact, they exert “latent potential” and autonomously transform into “latent potential” entities, directly affecting the occurrence and transformation of a specific event or phenomenon.

So, is “latent potential” necessarily related to change? Or does it always lead to change? The relationship between quantitative and qualitative change in Marxist philosophy offers a foundational framework for understanding this dynamic. The degree of deviation and accumulation of “latent potential” participates in and causes change, manifesting in different timing and intensity. When precipitated by the opportune moment and there is a certain impact, “latent potential” becomes an “unanticipated consequences”. It can even become the “latent potential” force that leads to the next stage of development.

Is “latent potential” always unexpected? This is the question explored by the investigation of “multi-dimensional interlinked network”. When we identify the latent potential within parallel relationships, to a certain extent, it transforms into a multi-dimensional nexus. Similar to the concept of “centralism”, such as “teacher centralism” or “student centralism”, the “center” here is a person or other entity that possesses relativity. The “latent potential” entities that exist in multiple dimensions approach the center infinitely, and the closer to the center, the more pronounced and significant the effect and meaning, becoming the “certain aspect” we consider; those further away can become the “latent potential” that influences the closer “latent potential” entities, akin to “atoms”. The scope of this mechanism's effect is hypothesized in this study as the conventional intuitive concept of space, abstracted into a “spatial form” with some kind of quantitative relationship in the real world. If the formulation of response strategies (such as policies) starts from a certain aspect to ultimately solve the problem, then the multi-dimensional relationship is a deep-seated link in the chain of relationships, causing a deviation of a specific “latent potential” in one link, under the influence of human subjectivity, to guide us towards our ultimate goal. This process is the “Latent Potential Exploration Centered on the Self” process. Or more specifically and in-depth, it respects subjective will and is more in line with the combination of “theory and practice”.

The process of latent potential exploration itself also contains “latent potential”. On the surface, it is a concrete existence premised on the control of anticipated existence. Therefore, the author hypothesizes that “latent potential” includes morality, emotion, value goals, rational choice, reality, and “factual experience that cannot be anticipated in advance”. Once the above framework is established, the connotation of non-material resources can be summarized as the “latent potential” we are aware of.

### 3.2. The Dilemma of Finding the Self within “Latent Potential”

“Latent potential” reflects the malleability of the “self” within society. Since the focus remains on “first-generation college students”, we can start from reality and case studies to uncover the “latent potential” connections hidden within to ultimately help “first-generation students” find a way out.

In the current educational landscape, “educational inequality” pervades numerous research fields as a social phenomenon. From the perspective of “first-generation”, they face job market pressures within educational inequality, global competition from the trend of studying abroad, and even in China, they are deeply aware of the evolution of university life patterns, constantly encountering educational reforms implemented through policy. Family resources and cultural capital are hierarchically intertwined with the cultural capital behind the school's training objectives, and the “old versus new” debate constantly influences the choices of college students. They also attempt to return to their true selves, taking the lead in their future during a stage of life that should not be missed, and considering matters more comprehensively and seemingly more rational, but in essence, it is to move forward for a certain goal, supported by a unique “sense of meaning”[11].

Weber's “Switchman” hypothesis suggests that “it is not ideas that directly govern human behavior, but material and ideal interests. However, the 'worldview' created by ideas often acts like a switchman, determining which track of interest-driven behavior will occur”[12]. This “sense of meaning” can be a “directional guide” or an explanation for “rationalizing the outcome”[11], and the recombination of the original culture into a new culture transforms the “intuitive dependent” into a “goal controller”. If college students fail to grasp the impact level of the “grades - input - goals” triad on themselves, they will be in a “semi-awakeness”, hovering between an intuitive dependence and the goal control model. According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, George Kuh's theory of student engagement, and the value-driven theory of cultural and action relationship, the three correspond to the chaotic state of students being entangled in reality, self, and moral emotions.

The “sense of meaning” often stems from external influences when it serves as a prior guide, yet when it is used as an ex post explanation, it carries a connotation of “making excuses”. In case interviews, some people use the expression “it was later discovered”(Interviewee:I-M-21)[13] to reflect on actions that did not meet their expectations. This is akin to the situation where everyone knows how to talk theoretically but fails to act when faced with reality, ultimately met with the phrase “I told you so”. It seems that we all understand many principles, yet we cannot prevent what is destined to happen. I believe these principles are a kind of “factual experience that cannot be anticipated in advance”, which invisibly merges into the history of human civilization, becoming a common language that transcends racial boundaries.

Why do we use the “sense of meaning” to explain and compensate for disappointment? “Ultimately, people will pursue goals within the scope of their cultural competence”[12]. What is within one's capability is “what I have” (reality), and what is disconnected from one's capability is “what I want” (goal). Discovering “what I have” can only maintain an individual's motivation, while “what I want” can inspire an individual to take action and change. In the struggle between the two, the “self” may experience timidity, retreat, and feelings of inferiority stemming from a lack of family capital, gradually becoming lost.

There are differences in the level of education, educational goals, and social strata among parents. “Moral responsibility” [3]and the frustration of attempting communication without success can hinder the steps of “first-generation” in seeking help from their parents. Many students turn to schools and teachers for assistance, but they too often find themselves overwhelmed and unable to provide adequate support. Current research indicates that in the economic market, the relationship and role of the “two hands” of government and the market are constantly being adjusted. In the field of education, the book “The Children of the County Middle School” reveals that excessive intervention by the government in schools can lead to an overbearing presence that distracts teachers from their teaching

duties, which deepens the contradictions between resource allocation and the leadership of the educational enterprise[14].

Furthermore, it is readily observable that there is a profound trust in the authority of educators deeply ingrained within Chinese society. The “legitimacy of authority” is understood from two dimensions: rationality and experience. It implies that the influence on people's thought processes and social structure must conform to certain standards or objective criteria, taking into account public recognition; otherwise, there may be biases[15]. When Chinese people experience a deficiency in self-confidence, they are more inclined to entrust “major matters” to individuals or organizations with authoritative status in search of a sense of security. This may be related to the cultural emphasis on the concept of blood relations.

Mead once explained “personality dissociation”, which means “the structure of an individual's personality is identical to the structure of the social group in which they are situated”[16]. When social groups are diverse, individuals find themselves corresponding with different selves, which can easily come into conflict upon intersection. Research has highlighted that the process of upward mobility for “first-generation” involves both “gain” and “loss”[17]. When experiencing “loss”, the corresponding “self” may forfeit a stable social position, leading the individual to wander on the periphery of different societies. This self-uncertainty can strip students of their safety net, making it even more difficult for them to adapt to and face the social environment they are poised to enter.

### **3.3. Practical Pathways for the Transformation and Utilization of Non-material Resources**

In this study, the specific circumstances and shifts of “latent potential” have not been elaborated, representing an area that merits further refinement in subsequent research. However, the interpretive path centered on the self and latent potential can still provide a foundation for introspection among college students. How can first-generation college students utilize the mining of latent potential and transform it into a controllable operation that enhances the probability of expected outcomes?

First, communication with parents (family).

The KIPP[18] model suggests that to disrupt the vicious cycle of “disadvantaged children”, they ought to be liberated as much as possible from the influence of their families. Nevertheless, Heni Xiong contend that the “peripheral educational participation” of parents is indispensable[19], prompting profound contemplation: What substantive contributions does the family truly make to our development? This line of inquiry necessitates a paradigm shift away from the misconception that the world is the exclusive domain of a particular demographic. The family education of “first-generation students” exerts a dual effect, encapsulating both “family” and “urban-rural” intergenerational transmission[20], which means that to some extent, we are a continuation of our progenitors and the specific temporal milieu in which they are embedded. Such a perspective allows for a commonality of both the shared genetic and cultural heritage as well as the acknowledgment of individual distinctiveness. Therefore, one aspect of self-awareness includes understanding one's parents. Studies on the impact of family discord on adolescent suicidal ideation has identified the relationship between children and parents as the most common predictive factor for suicide behavior among adolescents[21], indicating that family communication continues to exert on the growth of children. From the perspective of “latent potential”, since we are aware of the risks inherent in communication, we can control the content of conversations within a manageable range to minimize risks.

Second, self-exploration through “returning to one's roots”.

The concept of “bloodline inheritance” facilitates an understanding of our parents' nature and concurrently aids in the process of self-discovery. After transitioning to a new cultural milieu, the conflict with the original culture can deepen students' confusion. This includes a degree of questioning of the existing when the original cultural capital and habits cannot solve the current dilemmas. A

group of stragglers who have drifted away from their “goal” and “self” are only work out of intuition and inertia without a sense of direction, without a sense of belonging to either side. When students believe that all problems stem from family factors, it is a form of self-denial. By looking at one’s family of origin and past with a dialectical perspective, and gaining the courage to face reality, students will be better able to break down the barriers of moral norms with creative shift in perspectives, enabling the achievement of a “living a moral life” not driven by a performative morality[13], and comply with the specific moral norms of different situations as they change.

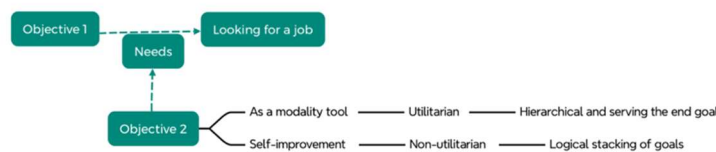
Third, improving practical self-healing abilities.

The “self-healing ability” poses a considerable challenge for college students, particularly for those who are disoriented and have suffered psychological trauma, necessitating external guidance and support. Individual actions are influenced by the group environment. While social inclusiveness is apparent, allowing different groups to coexist, there exists extremely hidden commonality characteristics in social integration. The benefits that college students derive from “social engagement” [11] extend beyond interpersonal relationships and career prospects. It is a valuable resource that is often overlooked due to concerns over academic interference. Regardless of whether the goal have been established, after taking the first step, experiencing failure, and trying again, the entire process involves continuous reflection and awareness of one's strengths to enhance confidence. (See Figure 1.)



**Figure 1.** The Path of Social Engagement

“Goal Controllers” with clear objectives and self-assurance tend to break down their goals into steps and quickly identify potential risks hidden in the situation, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** The Step-by-Step Goal-Oriented Thinking Pattern of “Goal Controllers”

## 4. CONCLUSION

Thus, through an in-depth exploration that integrates the significance of case study with existing viewpoints, the research delves into the growth factors behind the upward mobility of first-generation college students. In the conceptual definition of non-material resources, the discovery of "latent potential" reveals that “factual experience that cannot be anticipated in advance” is not a prerequisite for the next phase of life, nor is it a form of self-consolation or criticism. It serves as an instrumentality

to aid “first-generation students” in navigating challenges. It is only through a relentless pursuit of learning from practice, reflecting, and possessing resilience and courage that individuals can gradually find their true selves and achieve the alignment and smooth transition of life's trajectory.

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