

The Formation Mechanism of the "Suspension" Predicament among Youth during the Initial School-to-Work Transition: Cognitive Misalignment, Familial Pressure, and Fractured Social Support

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Abstract

Against the macro-level backdrop of profound economic transformation and an annual cohort of more than ten million graduates, contemporary young people face pronounced uncertainty during the initial school-to-work transition, manifested in a distinct predicament of "suspension" in employment and social adaptation. Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews, this study shifts attention from macro-level unemployment indicators to individuals' lived experiences and examines the dynamic mechanisms through which youth "suspension" is produced. The findings show that this predicament stems primarily from structural pressures in three domains: cognitive misalignment between educational expectations and entry-level jobs, intergenerational conflict rooted in traditional family norms, and deficiencies in external employment-support systems across universities, the labor market, and communities. Addressing these problems requires a shift from a narrow outcome-oriented approach toward comprehensive human-centered support. By strengthening individual capabilities, easing intergenerational strain, and rebuilding a multidimensional safety-net network, more inclusive institutional arrangements can facilitate young people's transition from "suspension" to stable social embeddedness.

Keywords

Youth Employment; Suspension Predicament; Cognitive Misalignment; School-to-work Transition; Barriers to Social Embeddedness.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's economy has shifted from a stage of high-speed growth to one of high-quality development, while industrial restructuring, digital technological innovation, and labor-market reconfiguration have proceeded simultaneously. Employment among university graduates is therefore facing new challenges. According to data from the Ministry of Education, the number of graduates from regular higher-education institutions in 2025 was expected to reach 12.22 million, an increase of 430,000 year on year and a new record high. At the same time, the supply of high-quality jobs has grown relatively slowly, intensifying competition for youth employment. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics show that in the second half of 2024, the surveyed urban unemployment rate among people aged 16-24 (excluding students) reached 18.8% at one point, while the rate among those aged 25-29 reached 6.8%. The tension between an expanding graduate population and limited employment opportunities has placed sustained pressure on university graduates.

However, the difficulties facing university graduates can no longer be understood simply as a rise in unemployment. As competition in the labor market intensifies and employment structures change, growing numbers of graduates are experiencing delayed employment, unemployment, flexible employment, and frequent job turnover. Even after entering the labor

market, some young people remain in prolonged states of occupational instability, poor job matching, and unclear development trajectories. The central issue has therefore shifted from whether young people can obtain a job to whether they can secure stable employment and integrate successfully into society.

This issue is particularly salient for university graduates aged 22-30. The first several years after graduation are a critical period for career exploration, economic independence, and the transition into adult social roles. Yet this transition is becoming more prolonged and uncertain. This study conceptualizes such a condition as "suspension." Here, "suspension" does not refer simply to unemployment or joblessness; rather, it describes a transitional state in which university graduates have completed formal education but have not yet achieved stable career development or social embeddedness. This condition bears some resemblance to the concept of the "Odyssey Years" in Western youth studies, which emphasizes a prolonged transitional period between leaving school and fully entering adult social roles, characterized by exploration, trial and error, and identity construction. For Chinese university graduates in the initial school-to-work transition, a period that would ordinarily involve occupational positioning, economic independence, and social embeddedness may instead become a state of "suspension" because of intensified labor-market competition, persistent family normative pressures, and inadequate external support systems.

For a long time, the success narrative that equates educational credentials with capital has shaped relatively high occupational expectations among university graduates. Yet when career aspirations encounter intense job competition, structural barriers to entry, and insufficient support resources, young people often experience a pronounced gap between occupational expectations and actual circumstances. At the same time, family expectations regarding stable employment, romantic relationships, marriage, and family formation further intensify anxiety and uncertainty during role transitions. Youth "suspension" is therefore not merely a problem of individual adaptation; it emerges from the combined effects of individual cognition, family relations, and social support systems.

Accordingly, this study focuses on university graduates aged 22-30 and, drawing on ecological systems theory and social support theory, examines the formation mechanism of the "suspension" predicament during the initial school-to-work transition and the pathways through which young people may achieve social embeddedness. The study seeks to provide a reference for improving youth employment-support systems, promoting high-quality youth development, and advancing the construction of a youth-development-oriented society.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The transition of young people from school to the labor market has long been a central concern in both Chinese and international research. Liu Yanfeng [1] uses the concept of the "Odyssey Years" to show that contemporary young people's movement from school to society and from dependence to independence has become increasingly prolonged, experimental, and uncertain. This provides an important stage-based perspective for understanding the "suspension" predicament examined in this study.

2.1. Literature Review

2.1.1. Youth Employment Transition: Expectation Mismatch and Credential Devaluation

Existing studies generally indicate that youth employment difficulties are first manifested in a substantial mismatch between occupational expectations and labor-market realities. In his analysis of "credential disease," Ma Tianci [2] argues that a highly utilitarian social climate has generated widespread educational anxiety, leaving many young people caught between

credential devaluation and low-level basic positions. Zhou Yuxiang [3] further observes that even prolonged educational investment does not necessarily yield an occupational position commensurate with that investment, while "decent work" in the traditional sense has become increasingly scarce. Li Yue and Cheng Qian [4] empirically demonstrate the deeper contradiction: the expectations of young workers are seriously disconnected from market demand, drawing many into a zero-sum game characterized by "high competition and low entry thresholds," with substantial imbalances between investment and actual returns. Under such conditions, young people may unavoidably experience the difficulty of reconstructing their occupational role and the psychological distress described by Tong Xueli and Yang Jingya [5]. Overall, research on youth employment transition has adequately identified credential devaluation, job scarcity, and expectation mismatch in the current employment environment, thereby providing an important foundation for understanding youth employment anxiety. Nevertheless, this literature has focused more on employment outcomes and structural trends than on the concrete process through which young people experience disappointment, hesitation, oscillation, and instability during the initial school-to-work transition.

2.1.2. Youth "Suspension": Research on Social Exclusion and Deficits in Support

Some studies approach the issue at the individual level, emphasizing unclear self-positioning, insufficient occupational understanding, and biased employment perceptions during job seeking. Xie Youzhi [6] attributes these problems to a lack of accurate self-positioning and workplace awareness among young people. Other scholars, however, have revised this form of individual attribution. Drawing on the theory of the "accelerating society," Bai Yan and Wang Jian [7] argue that contemporary youths' cognitive gap is by no means merely a matter of psychological fragility; rather, it is deeply constrained by systemic exclusion generated by rapid technological change and shifts in class mobility.

Attributing youth employment difficulties solely to insufficient perseverance or biased attitudes would obscure the complex structural causes underlying the phenomenon and overlook the fact that contemporary young people often bear the pressure of multiple macro-level systems. Sha Yong [8], for example, notes that insufficient institutional support, weakened organizational functions, and the continuing transfer of risks to individuals are intensifying young people's uncertainty and anxiety about future development.

2.1.3. Social Embeddedness: Gaps in Research on the Initial School-to-Work Transition and Safety-Net Mechanisms

First, within the domain of family support, Liu Jie and Huang Wei [9] and Luan Xinchao and Zhou Liting [10] show that "grassroots youth" who lack substantial financial accumulation and the protection of family social capital tend to display greater vulnerability and a stronger sense of "suspension" during career transitions. Intergenerational constraints at the psychological level can be equally consequential. As Li Xiaojing and Tian Zhipeng [11] observe, the parental generation often treats "standard employment" - such as a position within the state system or a long-term labor contract - as the sole objective criterion for evaluating job quality. When these historically rooted occupational expectations are converted into coercive pressure, such as repeated demands to sit civil-service or public-sector establishment examinations, they become an invisible intergenerational constraint and intensify emotional strain and livelihood anxiety among young people. Second, in the employment market, Lin Lili [12] finds that, in the face of limited employer tolerance for inexperienced entrants, some young people make reluctant but rational forms of "emotional compromise." From the perspective of corporate risk avoidance, Fan Wei and Ge Shumin [13] further show that under macroeconomic uncertainty, firms tend to prefer experienced workers who can contribute immediately, thereby structurally excluding inexperienced young applicants. Finally, in the domain of institutional protection, the large population of youth in new forms of employment is confronted with the mismatch

between "new forms of employment and old policies" and the vacuum of "high risks but weak protection" identified by Zhang Zhenyu, Wang Qinghua, and Zhu He [14]. Yao Yuchun and Zhu Ling [15] similarly emphasize the virtualization of labor relations and the fragmentation of social protection. The breakdown of support across multiple systems ultimately pushes young people toward an isolated state of "suspension."

In summary, existing research has extensively examined credential devaluation, downward occupational mobility, and structural exclusion in youth employment transitions and has also considered the effects of family, market, and institutional environments on youth development. However, much of this work remains centered on macro-structural explanation and pays insufficient attention to the process through which "suspension" forms among university graduates during the initial school-to-work transition and to the support mechanisms involved. Systematic analysis of the interactions among individuals, families, and the social environment also remains limited. To address these gaps, this study uses in-depth interviews and draws on ecological systems theory and social support theory to examine the formation mechanism of youth "suspension" and pathways toward social embeddedness.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations

2.2.1. Ecological Systems Theory: Understanding Multilevel Environmental Influences on Youth "Suspension"

Ecological systems theory holds that individual development occurs through interactions among multiple environmental systems and that personal behavior and developmental outcomes are jointly shaped by micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level environments.

For university graduates undergoing the initial school-to-work transition, employment and social embeddedness are not determined solely by individual ability. They are jointly influenced by individual cognition, family relationships, support from universities and employers, and the broader policy environment. Youth "suspension" is therefore not merely a problem of individual adjustment but an outcome shaped by multiple layers of the surrounding environment. On this basis, the present study analyzes the formation mechanism of youth "suspension" across the dimensions of the individual, family, university, enterprise, community, and policy systems.

2.2.2. Social Support Theory: Understanding the Mechanism of Support Fragmentation

Social support theory emphasizes that individuals cannot effectively cope with risks and stress without emotional, informational, and resource support provided through social relationship networks.

For university graduates in the initial school-to-work transition, families, universities, enterprises, communities, and government jointly constitute a social support system. In practice, however, these support networks display varying degrees of absence and fragmentation, leaving young people without effective support during occupational transitions and thereby intensifying "suspension." Social support theory therefore provides an important theoretical basis for analyzing both the formation mechanism of youth "suspension" and pathways toward social embeddedness.

Drawing on ecological systems theory, this study divides the generation of youth "suspension" into three analytical levels: individual cognition, family support, and social support. Drawing on social support theory, it further examines the roles of informational, emotional, instrumental, and institutional support across different systems. On this basis, the study constructs an analytical framework of "multidimensional pressure - formation of suspension - systemic safety-net support - social embeddedness."

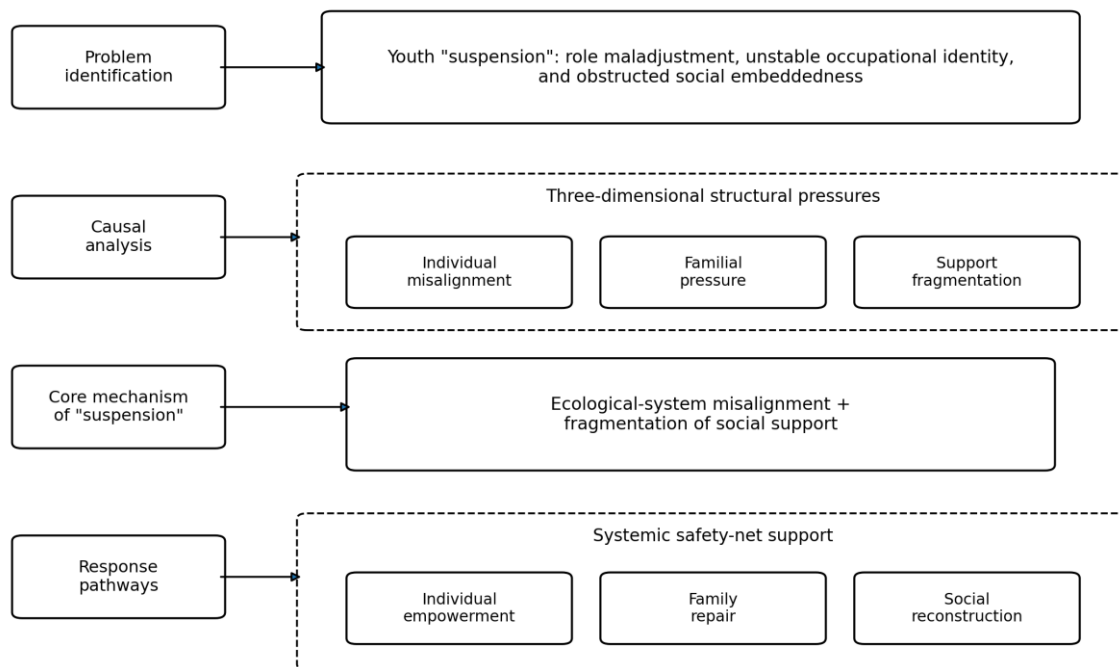


Fig. 1. Analytical framework

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Method

The core concept of "suspension" in this study is not a static condition that can be measured by a single objective indicator. Rather, it encompasses the psychological discrepancy, identity crisis, and emotional distress experienced by young people during the initial school-to-work transition. To capture the process through which this condition is generated, the study employs in-depth interviews and collects first-person narratives of young people's transition from university to the workplace, with the aim of revealing their concrete experiences of job-search setbacks, obstructed role transitions, and intergenerational family conflict.

3.2. Research Process

3.2.1. Interview Guide Design

The interview guide was organized around five dimensions: life-course history and assessment of current circumstances; experiences of "suspension"; social support networks; practical difficulties and pressures; and coping strategies and policy expectations. Moving from relatively general to more in-depth topics, these modules helped reconstruct participants' initial career expectations and the gap between those expectations and reality, while also systematically identifying their support networks, practical pressures, and internal anxieties. The resulting material provides an empirical basis for analyzing the formation mechanism of the "suspension" predicament and potential pathways for social work intervention.

3.2.2. Participants

This study focuses on university graduates aged 22-30. The group was selected for two main reasons. First, this age range represents a critical period in the transition from student to working adult and is central to occupational positioning, economic independence, and social embeddedness. Second, members of this group commonly face intensified employment competition, unstable career development, and pressure associated with changing social roles, making them particularly likely to experience "suspension."

To enhance the richness and typicality of the data, 12 university graduates were interviewed. All participants had completed higher education and were in the stage of initially entering the labor market after graduation. Their situations included unemployment, flexible employment, frequent job changes, and relatively stable employment, thereby capturing a range of experiences during the initial school-to-work transition.

To create a trusting environment for dialogue, data were collected primarily through offline in-depth interviews. With participants' consent, interviews were audio- or video-recorded throughout. This made it possible to capture micro-expressions and pauses in speech when participants recounted setbacks, while an electronic interview guide was used to support follow-up questioning.

Table 1. Basic characteristics of interview participants

Participant code	Age	Gender	Major	Graduation	Status
P1 (Xiao Yu)	24	Female	Software Engineering	Jun. 2024	Unemployed
P2 (Zhou Xiaoshen)	23	Male	Software Engineering	Jun. 2024	Employed
P3 (Xiao Wang)	29	Female	Accounting	Jun. 2017	Employed
P4 (Xiao Xue)	25	Female	Social Work	Jun. 2023	Employed
P5 (Xiao Yu)	23	Female	Software Engineering	Jun. 2024	Unemployed
P6 (Xiao Xu)	23	Female	English	Jun. 2023	Unemployed
P7 (Xiao Zhang)	24	Male	Design	Jun. 2024	Unemployed
P8 (Xiao Zheng)	24	Male	Mathematics	Jun. 2024	Employed
P9 (A Xuan)	23	Female	Arts (Dance)	Jun. 2024	Unemployed
P10 (A Xin)	25	Female	Health Care (Dentistry)	Jun. 2023	Unemployed
P11 (Xiao Ding)	26	Female	Cabin Crew	Jun. 2023	Employed
P12 (Xiao Ma)	26	Male	Electronic Engineering	Jun. 2022	Unemployed

Note: (1) Participant codes correspond to interview order. (2) Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' privacy.

4. The Generative Logic of the "Suspension" Predicament among University Graduates during the Initial School-to-Work Transition

In *Suspension: Urban Survival of Migrants*, sociologist Yan Fei [16] uses "suspension" to describe a condition in which individuals leave the familiar social networks and family protection of their original communities, enter a large and rationalized modern system, yet fail to obtain corresponding institutional protection or social recognition, leaving them "rootless" and figuratively suspended within the social structure. Against the backdrop of interacting multilevel social systems, the transition from school to the labor market is not a linear process. Rather, it unfolds dynamically through the combined effects of micro-level cognitive structures, meso-level family interactions, and external social support systems. The state of "suspension" during the initial school-to-work transition is therefore essentially the cumulative result of mismatches across multiple support systems and fragmentation across multiple forms of social support. Its formation follows a three-stage progressive mechanism: "cognitive misalignment - familial pressure - support fragmentation."

4.1. Cognitive Misalignment at the Individual Level: The Internal Starting Point of "Suspension"

From the perspective of ecological systems theory, limitations in cognition and psychological adjustment among young people during the initial school-to-work transition are not simply individual deficiencies. Rather, they reflect structural mismatches among the education system, labor market, and support system. Under these structural conditions, cognitive frameworks formed during university are often poorly aligned with market logic, making young people more likely to experience self-doubt after setbacks in job seeking.

4.1.1. Credential Inflation and Skill Mismatch

The first challenge confronting young people during the initial school-to-work transition is the gap between occupational expectations and market realities generated by "credential inflation." At the cognitive level, this process may consolidate unrealistic expectations before young people enter the labor market. Under educational expansion and intensified credential competition, universities have continually reinforced an assumed association between higher credentials and better jobs. The Credential Society argues that modern education strengthens a success logic in which "credentials are capital," encouraging young people to treat academic qualifications as a key credential for entering desirable occupations [17]. Before they enter the workplace, this idea may already have become a deeply rooted career expectation.

However, as labor supply continues to increase and competition for jobs intensifies, the relative advantage of educational credentials is diluted. Employers increasingly emphasize job-specific competence, practical experience, and comprehensive capabilities, making educational credentials less able to translate directly into employment advantages.

Young people may therefore encounter a sharp reality shock after entering the labor market. On the one hand, occupational expectations formed over many years are difficult to realize, yet job searches continue to be guided by credential-based assumptions, producing cumulative failure. On the other hand, a clear mismatch may exist between practical skills and job requirements. Even highly educated young people may consequently begin to doubt their own competence. When they cannot meet employers' demand for workers who can contribute immediately, they may come to resemble the "ant tribe" - low-income university graduates - and experience a pronounced gap between expectations and reality [18]. Repeated setbacks can destabilize prior career plans and deepen self-doubt. Unable either to accept available jobs or to reconstruct new career goals, some young people move repeatedly among continued job searching, repeated job selection, and prolonged unemployment, gradually entering a state of "suspension."

"After graduation, my work did not develop in the direction I had imagined. I never expected my pay to be about the same as that of most workers in society. I thought I would at least be one level above most of them, but it turned out that I was in the same stratum. It makes me feel as if all those years of study made no difference. I have also had a long gap between jobs. Finding a suitable job that I actually like is really difficult. It just has not gone smoothly." (P7, Xiao Zhang)

4.1.2. Insufficient Occupational Socialization

Insufficient occupational socialization further weakens young people's capacity to revise their expectations. It prevents them from recalibrating their roles before entering the workplace, thereby amplifying initial cognitive gaps. University education tends to emphasize disciplinary knowledge while devoting relatively limited attention to workplace rules, organizational culture, interpersonal communication, psychological adjustment, and labor relations. As a result, many young people continue to interpret the workplace through a student-role perspective at the time of graduation.

When young people enter organizations with the assumptions that educational attainment represents the endpoint of development and that the student role can be carried into work, they encounter performance appraisal, competitive pressure, organizational discipline, and the logic of capital operations. Their original expectations are not confirmed. Once credential-based expectations are contradicted by workplace realities, maladjustment can generate a pronounced psychological gap and obstruct the transition into a new role.

Young people may lack experience in managing complex workplace relationships and may be psychologically unprepared for failure and frustration. They may not yet have developed the mindset required of working adults and may have limited understanding of corporate survival competition, bankruptcy and layoff risks, or the complexity of labor-capital relations, while underestimating capital's pursuit of immediate profit maximization [19]. As difficulties in workplace adaptation accumulate, some young people begin to resign frequently, move repeatedly between jobs, or return to the family home while waiting for new opportunities. Their social roles are repeatedly interrupted and reconstructed, occupational socialization is prolonged, and the state of "suspension" continues.

"Working is really different from being at school. At school, someone supervises you, so you know what you should be doing at each point in time, and teachers generally treat students the same. Once I started working, I realized that you have to compete for almost everything yourself. If you are not proactive, you can be eliminated. At school, even if you do not study hard, there is not necessarily a serious penalty. I find it difficult to change my mindset, and no one teaches you the rules. Most of the time, I just feel discouraged." (P7, Xiao Zhang)

4.1.3. Workplace Involution and Value Anxiety

Competition in the workplace further intensifies young people's doubts about their own value, reinforcing initial cognitive gaps through external social evaluation. During job seeking, young people do not always revise their understanding of the value of their credentials. Because skills remain mismatched with job requirements, many can obtain only highly replaceable and repetitive entry-level positions, in sharp contrast to their long-standing expectations of "decent work." Such jobs offer limited autonomy and a weak sense of value, making it difficult to gain occupational achievement or establish a stable professional identity.

Young people may consequently develop a diminished sense of self-worth and experience themselves as highly instrumentalized or "machine-like" workers. They struggle to obtain stable occupational identification or affirmation of value and may perceive repetitive and trivial tasks as lacking substantive meaning, thereby experiencing disappointment and a sense of inequality in internship and work settings [20]. Under continuing comparison pressure and persistent gaps between expectation and reality, young people may enter a cycle of "repeated job seeking - repeated self-denial - choosing again." Occupational direction remains unstable and value identity unresolved, eventually resulting in prolonged "suspension" outside stable employment and social embeddedness.

"The job was not very stable and I was fairly replaceable... If I left, someone else could do the work. I do not think I got the opportunity because I was especially capable; it was more that the position itself did not require a high degree or a great deal of experience. It was easy to learn, so I felt that the job did not require any real core competitiveness." (P4, Xiao Xue)

4.2. Intergenerational Family Pressure: Sustained Reinforcement of "Suspension"

Within ecological systems theory, the family is the microsystem most closely connected to young people and should provide emotional buffering and resource support during the initial school-to-work transition. This study, however, finds that families do not always play a protective role. From the perspective of social support theory, the problem is not necessarily a

complete absence of family support. Rather, support can be strongly normative and controlling, distorting the emotional support that families are expected to provide and thereby continually reinforcing youth "suspension."

4.2.1. Intergenerational Conflict over Career Values

The distortion of family support begins with differences in understandings of work. The parental generation's occupational values are strongly shaped by experience with the work-unit system, memories of material scarcity, and awareness of layoff risks. Parents are therefore more likely to regard positions within the state system, long-term contracts, and stable income as reliable means of protection against social risk. In this view, work is first and foremost associated with stability, security, and protection. By contrast, young people who grew up amid educational expansion and the internet era place greater emphasis on occupational interests, self-realization, and opportunities for personal development, and they often hope to identify a suitable path through continued experimentation.

These differences do not remain merely at the level of parental attitudes. They are translated into continuing advice and evaluation that directly intervenes in young people's career choices. When young people enter market-sector employment, change jobs frequently, or temporarily postpone employment, parents may interpret these choices as signs of instability, lack of planning, or even failure.

Continuous intergenerational disapproval and one-dimensional intervention can gradually deprive ordinary career exploration of legitimacy. This not only weakens young people's autonomy in decision-making but also intensifies career anxiety. Caught between maintaining their own preferences and meeting family expectations, they repeatedly oscillate between alternatives and struggle to establish a stable occupational path, which further deepens "suspension."

"My parents really want me to take the civil-service examination. Almost every week when I see them, they keep telling me over and over how good it is to be a civil servant. I avoid the topic, and sometimes it really annoys me. I just do not want to decide the direction of my whole life in that way. I do not want my life to be fixed like that." (P9, A Xuan)

4.2.2. Coupling of Marriage and Childbearing Pressures

Beyond career choice, families often link employment closely with other life tasks, including romantic relationships, marriage, and childbearing. Traditional family norms emphasize "establishing a career and forming a family." Stable employment is regarded as an important prerequisite for marriage, while marriage itself is often treated as a marker of entry into adult society.

In *Who Is in Your Family?*, Shen Yifei [21] argues that marriage in the past functioned as a form of "economic mutual-aid association" or survival partnership, whereas many young people today accept marriage only when it is grounded in strong emotional resonance and self-development. When families place employment, marriage, and life success within a single evaluative framework, the pressure experienced by young people extends beyond employment itself to encompass career development, family expectations, and broader life planning.

Temporary employment setbacks can therefore trigger continuing family questioning about marriage, childbearing, and future development. This strengthens uncertainty about the future and further delays young people's transition into adult social roles and social embeddedness.

"I definitely would not get married before I have a career of my own, because supporting a family is really difficult and exhausting. You cannot do it without an economic foundation. My current situation is not exactly optimistic, and I am not trying to complain that I was not born into a wealthy family. But if I am going to build a family and give my future child good conditions, I want to become financially secure first - to the point where I genuinely feel I can afford to have a child

and to get married without that pressure. Marriage costs money, having children costs money - everything costs money." (P8, Xiao Zheng)

4.2.3. Distortion of Emotional Support

Families should ideally provide understanding, acceptance, emotional comfort, and other forms of support when young people encounter setbacks, helping them buffer stress and restore confidence. This study finds, however, that in some families such support is gradually transformed into control-based intervention. During young people's job searches, parents may rely on lecturing, negation, or substitute decision-making, hoping to use their own experience to help their children "avoid detours."

Although such support is motivated by concern, it can evolve into sustained intervention in young people's career choices and life planning, weakening their autonomy. Young people may respond by reducing communication, avoiding discussion, or withdrawing from family interaction. The family can then shift from an emotional support system into a new source of psychological pressure.

When young people experience employment setbacks, cannot obtain understanding from their families, and simultaneously lack external support resources, negative emotions accumulate and self-efficacy declines. They may then become trapped in a dual predicament: unable to continue career exploration effectively and unable to regain meaningful family support. This further intensifies the state of "suspension."

4.3. Fragmentation of Social Support: A Structural Mechanism Generating "Suspension"

From the perspective of ecological systems theory, universities, enterprises, communities, and policy arrangements jointly constitute important meso- and external support systems through which young people move from education into the social division of labor. These systems should coordinate occupational guidance, job absorption, resource linkage, and institutional protection to support the transition from "student" to "worker." From the perspective of social support theory, however, the support system does not fail in parallel across all domains. Instead, it exhibits a progressive mechanism of fragmentation: insufficient emotional support, distorted or inadequate information, limited instrumental support, and lagging institutional support coexist. As a result, young people struggle to obtain sustained resources during the initial school-to-work transition, and "suspension" is continually intensified.

4.3.1. Failure of University Career Guidance

As a key institutional starting point for entry into the labor market, universities should provide occupational information, capacity training, and support for role transition. Yet some universities have long treated outcome indicators such as employment rates and contract-signing rates as core evaluation criteria. Employment services may therefore drift away from their original purpose of supporting career development and instead focus more heavily on implementation of tripartite employment agreements and the statistical reporting of graduate destinations, while providing insufficient preparation for the realities of private-sector employment and workplace experience [22].

Under this mechanism, career guidance often remains limited to superficial information transmission and formal procedural tasks, without responding deeply to the actual structure of the labor market or the competency requirements of specific positions. Fan Shiming [23] similarly argues that lagging university program structures, formalized career-planning education, and asymmetrical employment information are important meso-level causes of person-job mismatch and obstructed initial employment transitions. These conditions further exacerbate maladjustment during the school-to-work transition.

The weakening of university support means that key informational and capacity-building support is interrupted during the transition from the education system to the employment system, producing a substantial mismatch between young people's cognition, competencies, and workplace demands.

"To be honest, what the university provided did not match today's social environment at all. Their approach was too old-fashioned, and the employment environment is very poor now. My first employer owed me wages. After I took the matter to labor arbitration, I found a second job, and that employer also delayed my pay. I felt completely hopeless and at one point did not even want to look for another job. No one had told me that after getting a job I would need to pay attention to these kinds of issues. Once you enter the workplace, you realize that in an organization you may not feel protected by anyone." (P6, Xiao Xu)

4.3.2. Structural Exclusion in the Labor Market

Occupational understandings formed during university can be overly idealized, while employers may further expose deficiencies in young people's practical capabilities. Such cognitive misalignment can make it difficult for young applicants to position themselves accurately within the labor market.

Under intense market competition, modern enterprises often prefer experienced workers who can immediately generate surplus value and may be highly reluctant to bear the risk of "sunk training costs" for newcomers. Because employee turnover is a major risk to returns on corporate training investment, graduates may encounter structural exclusion in the labor market [24]. This can also translate into marginalization within organizations.

Enterprises should ideally provide opportunities for occupational practice and developmental support. In reality, however, training can be weak and the transmission of experience interrupted, making it difficult for young people to close capability gaps through a learning process. As internal organizational competition intensifies, experience sharing declines and job instability increases, leaving many young people in a dual predicament of low support and high pressure at the beginning of their careers.

"One bad part was the invisible overtime. For example, even after work you still had to reply to messages. If an employee's pace of development did not match business requirements, they could just be dismissed. I felt I was learning too slowly and could not handle some parts of the job, so I wanted to give up. The salary was also very low - extremely low. Sometimes I went to work without even knowing what I should be doing. Other people were busy, but I did not understand their work logic or methods, and I could not learn them quickly enough." (P5, Xiao Yu)

4.3.3. Absence of Community Services

There should be transitional support between universities and enterprises, and community systems should also provide opportunities for renewed social embeddedness when young people's career pathways are unsettled. Communities should supply employment information and public resources and promote youth social participation. In practice, however, these functions are not fully realized. Young people receive limited assistance in reconnecting with society, and during gaps in employment they often lack access to necessary social resources, which further intensifies feelings of social isolation.

Current community-service systems also remain oriented primarily toward traditional vulnerable groups and devote insufficient attention to young people who are unemployed or undergoing the initial school-to-work transition. Young people are therefore structurally overlooked within some community systems and cannot obtain the employment information or psychological support they need.

As an intermediary layer connecting the micro-level family system with the macro-level social system, the community should provide a transitional support space. When this function is absent, young people lack an important setting for re-embedding themselves into social life.

"There is basically no employment information in the community. Forget employment - there may not even be much aimed at young people at all. Most activities are for older residents. When I look for work, I go through opportunities one by one on my phone. I do not expect the community to deal with it. Sometimes whatever they could introduce might be worse than what I can find myself, and the really good opportunities would probably be taken long before they ever reached the community." (P12, Xiao Ma)

4.3.4. Insufficient Policy Safety Nets

China currently lacks employment-assistance laws and regulations specifically designed for youth as a distinct group. Relevant provisions are dispersed across various policy documents, and a comprehensive institutional framework for youth employment assistance has not yet been established [25]. From the perspective of social support theory, policy should provide the most basic form of institutional support and a stable minimum safety net for young people. In practice, however, policy measures are more heavily concentrated on incentives for employers, while transitional support at the individual level remains limited. Implementation can also involve information asymmetries and relatively high access costs, making policy resources difficult for young people to obtain effectively. This insufficiency in institutional support makes young people more vulnerable to the individualization of risk during unemployment or joblessness, whereby social risks shift from systemic sharing to individual responsibility. In other words, macro-level institutional systems are not effectively embedded in the process of youth development, causing support chains to break at critical points and further prolonging the period required for social embeddedness.

"I do not know what policies there are for graduates like us. I thought those kinds of benefits were mainly for children or pregnant women because I never see this information. When I graduated, I did not even know that some graduates who had paid social insurance for a certain number of years could receive money. A family member told me. And if you actually want to verify whether the information is valid, you have to contact someone at the local subdistrict office yourself. I called once, and they told me they also had to ask around. They even asked me where I had heard about it. That made me wonder whether the policy was different in every locality." (P10, A Xin)

Table 2. Participants' feedback on the external job-seeking environment

Participant	Public-sector establishment exam	Family influence (establishment)	University career guidance	Policy awareness/use	Community employment help	Employment satisfaction
P1	Yes (3)	Yes	Limited help	Aware; not used	No help	Somewhat dissatisfied
P2	Yes (1)	Yes	Very helpful	Used	No help	Satisfied
P3	Yes (1)	Yes	Limited help	Used	No help	Moderately satisfied
P4	No	-	Quite helpful	Used	No help	Moderately satisfied
P5	Yes (4)	Yes	Very helpful	Limited awareness	No help	Somewhat dissatisfied
P6	Yes (1)	Yes	Limited help	Used	No help	Somewhat dissatisfied
P7	Yes (1)	Yes	Limited help	Limited awareness	No help	Somewhat dissatisfied
P8	No	-	Limited help	Aware; not used	No help	Moderately satisfied
P9	Yes (3)	Yes	Limited help	Limited awareness	No help	Moderately satisfied
P10	No	-	Limited help	Limited awareness	No help	Somewhat dissatisfied

P11	Yes (1)	Yes	Limited help	Used	No help	Moderately satisfied
P12	Yes (1)	Yes	Limited help	Limited awareness	No help	Somewhat dissatisfied

5. Multidimensional Support and System Reconstruction: Pathways for Addressing Youth Employment "Suspension"

The Medium- and Long-Term Youth Development Plan (2016-2025) explicitly calls for promoting youth employment and entrepreneurship, improving youth social security, and strengthening mechanisms for youth social participation [26]. This indicates that establishing a youth-oriented safety net is consistent with the strategic direction of national youth development. Addressing the predicament of youth "suspension" therefore requires an integrated institutional arrangement spanning multiple ecological systems. On this basis, this study proposes a "full-cycle safety-net system for the initial school-to-work transition." Its core logic is to place youth development at the center and integrate four dimensions - capacity building, repair of family support, system linkage, and policy protection - into a complete support network, thereby promoting the transition from "suspension" to stable social embeddedness.

5.1. Enhancing Employability: From Credential Orientation to Competency Orientation

In the face of macro-level pressures and the predicament of "suspension" at the beginning of working life, young people need to strengthen their agency through the reconstruction of cognition and skills.

First, "micro-skill certification" can be used to rebuild young people's core competitiveness. Human-resources and social-security authorities, industry associations, and leading enterprises could jointly establish skill standards for occupations facing labor shortages. Modular training could then be offered in fields such as digital skills, content operations, and data analysis, with market-recognized certificates issued upon completion. This would help move beyond the idea that "credentials are the endpoint" and foster a dynamic occupational perspective in which "skills are capital," thereby strengthening young people's resilience in the labor market.

Second, scenario-based workplace training should be developed by introducing real corporate work settings into university education. Training should simulate labor-management negotiation, performance appraisal, and complex interpersonal conflicts so that students can understand the realities of commercial society and the logic of capital operations before graduation. Substantive internships should also be incorporated into graduation assessment, facilitating a structural shift from "knowledge acquisition" to "job adaptation" and strengthening resilience to setbacks.

Finally, young people should be encouraged to develop multiple pathways early in their careers. Alongside a primary occupation, they can cultivate supplementary work capacities or interest-based skills - for example, part-time content creation - to enhance career resilience and the capacity to withstand risk. Such diversification can reduce the uncertainty associated with reliance on a single employment structure and help restore a sense of control, psychological fulfillment, and self-worth.

5.2. Resolving Intergenerational Conflict between Traditional Family Norms and Individual Independence

As the primary group in youth socialization, the family should serve as a refuge from external risks and a source of emotional support. It is therefore necessary to reduce the psychological strain of youth "suspension" by improving intergenerational communication and strengthening external support.

First, communities and social work organizations can act as intermediary actors by inviting successful young people engaged in the digital economy and new forms of employment - such as flexible employment and freelance work - to explain the actual operating models, income potential, and development prospects of emerging industries to middle-aged and older adults. This can help parents understand changes in the contemporary labor market and provide their children with greater understanding and room for trial and error in career planning.

Second, the coercive coupling of traditional marriage and childbearing expectations should be reduced. Professional social workers can intervene in families experiencing conflict and help ease the dual pressure created when marriage is forcibly equated with life success. Young people, in turn, can gradually demonstrate economic independence and mature life planning and use evidence-based communication techniques such as nonviolent communication to engage their parents. Through rational and respectful dialogue, they can regain greater control over the pace of their lives and their occupational choices.

At the same time, alternative peer-support networks should be developed to compensate for deficiencies in emotional support within the family. Youth organizations and relevant platforms can use online communities and local offline spaces to establish mutual-aid groups for unemployed young people or those in gaps between jobs - effectively, "job-search partners." Young people facing similar difficulties can share employment information and substantially reduce the emotional depletion associated with navigating job searches alone.

5.3. Building a Multi-Actor Employment Support Network

One important reason for difficulties in the initial school-to-work transition is the breakdown of support chains among universities, enterprises, and communities. China has gradually developed a policy environment in which youth employment support, transformation of grassroots governance, digitalized public services, and youth development strategies advance in coordination. This creates a practical basis for a full-cycle safety-net system during the initial school-to-work transition. A collaborative meso-level support network involving multiple actors should therefore be established to achieve structural integration across the employment-support system.

Within the education system, national policy in recent years has continually emphasized employment priority for university graduates and protection for flexible employment. Programs such as the "Million Employment Internship Positions Recruitment Initiative" and the "Youth Employment Launch Program" indicate growing policy attention to the initial school-to-work transition. Universities should therefore shift from evaluation systems centered on employment rates toward indicators such as employment quality, person-job fit, and stability. Corporate mentors and industry experts should also be incorporated into university career-guidance systems to improve the practical relevance of career education.

Within enterprises, a "mentoring incentive mechanism" should be established. Fiscal subsidies could directly encourage internal mentors to participate in youth training and reduce employers' concerns about the risks and costs of training newcomers. Labor-process management should also be standardized to address invisible overtime and unreasonable employment practices, thereby improving the quality of young people's employment experience. Anonymous reporting channels should be made accessible for workplace bullying,

unreasonable internal rules, and invisible overtime, while substantive penalties and deterrence against unlawful enterprises should be strengthened to create a fairer and more supportive early-career environment.

Within communities, grassroots governance mechanisms such as the "Five-Sector Linkage" are continuing to develop, providing an organizational and resource foundation for social work intervention in youth employment support and social embeddedness. Community Party-mass service centers, Youth Home centers, and similar grassroots platforms already provide a basis for job-search assistance, psychological support, and resource linkage. "Youth Job-Search Stations" could be established within community service centers to provide workspaces, employment-information matching, and psychological support. Community platforms could also connect young people with enterprise resources and regularly organize recruitment and employment-matching activities, thereby strengthening the community's role as a "transitional space for social embeddedness."

5.4. Institutionalizing Safeguard Mechanisms

China is currently advancing the construction of "youth-development-oriented cities." Some localities, including Chengdu and Shenzhen, have begun to explore practices related to youth employment support, housing protection, psychological services, and public spaces for young people. These practices provide a practical foundation for movement from "suspension" toward social embeddedness. They also indicate that youth support is gradually shifting from a narrow focus on employment promotion toward more comprehensive developmental support, thereby creating an important policy environment for a full-cycle youth safety-net system. As Niu Bicheng, Ouyang Ruonan, and Li Yuhan [27] argue, multidimensional support networks that include rental subsidies and emergency medical assistance for flexible workers can reduce young people's concerns as they enter society.

As digital-government construction and integrated one-stop online government services continue to advance, digital service models based on automatic eligibility and benefit delivery are becoming increasingly mature. National employment-registration systems could therefore be used to automatically identify young people who are in gaps between jobs and to improve the precision of support for target groups.

Policy implementation can be further optimized in this context. For example, once a young person is verified as "unemployed" in the national job-seeking registration system, the system could automatically match them with relevant benefits and allow those benefits to be received without a separate application or through a one-click claim. Such a mechanism would reduce the time and procedural costs associated with accessing policy resources, improve the accessibility and substantive safety-net function of employment assistance, and help bridge the "last mile" of youth employment support.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

Based on qualitative interview data and informed by ecological systems theory and social support theory, this study analyzes the formation mechanism of the "suspension" predicament among university graduates during the initial school-to-work transition and identifies corresponding response pathways. The findings show that youth "suspension" is neither simply an employment difficulty nor merely a failure of individual adaptation. Rather, it is produced through the combined effects of mismatches across multiple environmental systems and fragmentation across multiple forms of social support. More specifically, the core mechanism consists of the interaction among individual cognitive misalignment, intergenerational family pressure, and fractured social support. Together, these forces obstruct the transition from student to worker and produce a state of "suspension" characterized by constrained social

embeddedness. Focusing on university graduates in the initial school-to-work transition, this study uses "suspension" as an analytical entry point and develops a framework of "multidimensional pressure - formation of suspension - systemic safety-net support - social embeddedness." This framework enriches process-oriented research on youth employment transitions and provides practical reference for improving youth employment-support policy. Accordingly, the study argues for a systemic safety-net approach and a full-chain support system spanning individuals, families, universities, enterprises, communities, and policy institutions, with the aim of facilitating a transition from "suspension" to stable social embeddedness.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the study relies on qualitative interviews and a relatively small sample, so its findings are more suitable for explaining mechanisms than for making broad statistical generalizations. Second, comparative analysis remains insufficient regarding variations in youth "suspension" across gender, urban-rural background, field of study, and regional resource conditions. Future research could combine survey methods with longitudinal follow-up designs to test the dynamic evolution of youth "suspension" and the actual effects of different safety-net mechanisms.

At a broader level, youth "suspension" concerns not only individual employment choices but also the quality of youth development, social equity, and human-capital accumulation in the context of Chinese modernization. Whether young people can successfully move from education to work, from dependence to independence, and from individual expectations to social embeddedness directly affects the fluidity of social mobility and the effective allocation of highly educated human resources. Youth "suspension" should therefore be incorporated into the construction of the youth-development support system. Policymakers should actively explore youth employment safety-net legislation and full-cycle support systems and use fairer, more continuous, and more inclusive institutional arrangements to provide a solid human-capital foundation for youth development and Chinese modernization.

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