

# **Childhood Socioeconomic Status and Its Impact on College Students' Career Adaptability: The Mediating Role of Self-efficacy**

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**Abstract:** Childhood socioeconomic status is crucial in shaping individual development, with a deep and complex impact. This study draws on the theory of generalized self-efficacy to investigate how childhood socioeconomic status affects career adaptability. By introducing an intermediary model, the research carefully examines the mediating role of generalized self-efficacy. Drawing upon a comprehensive survey encompassing 4676 Chinese college students, the findings reveal three key observations : (1) Childhood socioeconomic status significantly and positively influences the rationality of career adaptability among college students. (2) Self-efficacy mediates the effect of childhood socioeconomic status on career adaptability. This study aims to provide valuable insights into how socioeconomic status influences the psychological growth of college students and offer practical guidance on nurturing resilience and adaptability during university life.

**Keywords:** Childhood Socioeconomic Status, Career Adaptability, Self-efficacy, College Students' Financial Knowledge

## **1. Introduction**

Career adaptability is the skill to navigate through changes in job roles, which is crucial for success in today's fast-paced society. Studies indicate that possessing strong career adaptability can help deter problematic behavior in young people, as well as boost job satisfaction and overall happiness, highlighting its significance [1]. Childhood family environment, especially socioeconomic status, is a significant factor affecting career adaptability, with a notable influence on how college students adapt to

their careers.

The socioeconomic status experienced during childhood has a profound impact on personal development. Elements such as family dynamics, financial situation, and social circles all contribute significantly to molding fundamental beliefs and social behaviors. Beyond just material wealth, childhood socioeconomic status encompasses various aspects including family traditions, parent-child interactions, and availability of community support [2]. These components interact to shape an individual's response to adversity, ability to handle stress and approach to relationships. Consequently, it is vital to recognize how these influences establish cognitive and emotional groundwork in childhood, ultimately affecting the cultivation of career adaptability in later stages such as college.

The objective of this paper is to investigate the intricate connection between childhood socioeconomic status and the career adaptability of college students. The study will focus on the role of "self-efficacy" as a psychological factor that acts as a mediator to enhance the comprehension of this relationship. Self-efficacy, a significant concept in psychology, pertains to individuals' confidence in their capabilities and how this confidence impacts their actions and emotions [3]. By examining how childhood socioeconomic status influences self-efficacy, our objective is to achieve a deeper comprehension of the potential influence it may have on the career adaptability of university students. This research framework is designed to highlight the significance of childhood socioeconomic status in shaping the psychological development of college students. It also aims to offer theoretical direction on how to cultivate college students who are more resilient and adaptable.

The organization of the subsequent sections of this paper is outlined as follows: Section 2 presents a thorough review of pertinent literature and delves into the establishment of the hypotheses. Section 3 details the variables under consideration and the data utilized. The main findings are presented in Section 4. Concluding the paper, Section 5 offers insights on the study's outcomes, and its constraints, and suggests avenues for further investigation.

## **2. Review of Literature and Development of Hypotheses**

### **2.1 Career Adaptability**

Career adaptability is a psychological trait that describes a person's preparedness and capabilities to deal with present and upcoming changes in their career path, job changes, or personal setbacks throughout their lifespan [4]. This adaptability is manifested in various stages of a person's career journey, such as their strategic planning and forward-thinking regarding education, employment, and family life. Adolescence is a critical time for individuals to start laying the groundwork for their future professions, with many countries recognizing the significance of assisting young people in this aspect. Studies indicate that adolescents with strong career adaptability make more effective decisions, plan, and display more self-confidence when transitioning between careers. Ultimately, career adaptability plays a pivotal role in facilitating a successful adjustment to life, work, and one's professional trajectory [4, 5]. Furthermore, research suggests that higher levels of career adaptability can directly impact an individual's overall well-being, leading to increased life satisfaction and personal happiness [6]. Consequently, delving into the exploration of career adaptability is crucial for helping young individuals navigate future challenges and develop the necessary skills and competencies.

### **2.2 Childhood Socioeconomic Status**

Childhood socioeconomic status (childhood SES) refers to the extent of resources available or lacking in an individual's upbringing during childhood [2]. According to life-history theory, lower childhood SES is associated with a faster life-history strategy,

while higher childhood SES is linked to a slower life-history strategy. Those raised in challenging environments tend to exhibit riskier and more impulsive behaviors in response to limited resources, with unstable and insufficient expectations of future environmental conditions, leading them to prioritize short-term gains and opportunism, indicating a fast life-history strategy. Alternatively, those nurtured in benevolent environments are less prone to risky and impulsive behaviors when confronted with resource scarcity. This is due to their stable and optimistic expectations of future environmental conditions, which prompts them to prioritize long-term development. This aligns with a slow life-history strategy, emphasizing stability and sustainability over short-term gains.

Prior studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between SES and an individual's level of future planning and career exploration [7]. For individuals with a high childhood SES, a nurturing childhood environment equips them with the mental resilience to think ahead, allowing them to excel across various stages through effective expectation setting, planning, and execution, resulting in higher academic achievements in school and increased job satisfaction [8].

Hence, we propose the following hypothesis: Hypothesis 1. Childhood socioeconomic status is positively associated with career adaptability.

### **2.3 Generalized Self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy is a person's perception of their ability to effectively carry out a particular behavior. It indicates an individual's skill to partake in specific actions in a given situation and achieve the desired outcomes, illustrating their confidence in their capabilities. Furthermore, self-efficacy refers to individuals' trust in their capacity to accomplish specific behavioral goals within a particular domain, essentially embodying the belief that "I can achieve this." It consists of two elements: outcome expectations and efficacy expectations. Outcome expectations involve envisioning the potential consequences that a given behavior may yield, whereas efficacy expectations pertain to an individual's assessment of their personal capability to execute that behavior effectively.

Self-efficacy also reflects one's confidence in shaping events in their lives through their behavior. Beliefs in self-efficacy influence how individuals perceive, think, motivate themselves, and act. Generally, successful experiences boost self-efficacy, while recurrent failures diminish it.

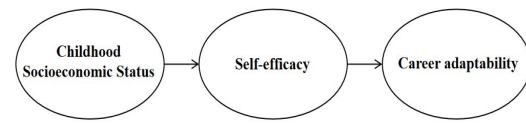
Because factors other than ability can impact the quality of activities, individuals typically need to consider both ability and non-ability factors when assessing self-efficacy in their behaviors. Alongside ability components, non-ability factors like task difficulty, personal effort, and the level of external support can have varying degrees of influence on the development of self-efficacy. When faced with challenging tasks, minimal personal effort, or limited external assistance, achieving success can bolster self-efficacy without diminishing it in case of failure. Conversely, when dealing with simple tasks, significant effort, or substantial external support, even succeeding may not boost self-efficacy, while failure could decrease it. How individuals attribute success and failure directly impacts their appraisal of self-efficacy.

Fernandes et al.'s study(2014) [9] finds a notable and positive association between self-efficacy and financial literacy, numeracy, confidence, long-term financial planning, willingness to take risks, saving for emergencies, credit score, constraints, and cognitive demands. Choy(2024)[3] revealed a significant correlation between students' self-efficacy in relevant skills and their choice of lifelong career, underscoring the critical role of self-efficacy in shaping career decisions. As an important predictor of career choices, self-efficacy is closely linked to personal factors and exerts an influence that is equally significant as personal career interest. Both self-efficacy and career interest are pivotal factors in career decisions. In summary, self-efficacy significantly impacts students' career decisions and resilience. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis

Hypothesis 2. Childhood socioeconomic status exerts an impact on career adaptability, with generalized self-efficacy acting as a mediating role in this relationship.

The schematic representation of the research framework for this paper is depicted in Figure

1.



**Figure 1. Research Framework**

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Sampling

An online survey was administered to 4,901 full-time college students in Sichuan Province. The dataset was refined by excluding 81 responses that took less than 240 seconds to complete, 5 responses with a star rating below 100 points, 12 responses from graduate or doctoral students, and 1 response with missing information. A total of 4676 valid questionnaires were retained. The basic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=4676)**

Variables	Group	Frequency	Proportion (%)
Gender	Male	533	24.4
	Female	1648	75.6
Grade	Freshman	905	19.3
	Sophomore	2196	47
	Junior	1521	32.5
	Senior	44	0.9
	Fifth year	10	0.2
Monthly living expenses (RMB) (including one-time pocket money)	≤800	185	3.9
	800<x≤2000	3759	80.4
	>2000	615	13.1
	I don't know	117	2.5
Monthly household income (RMB)	≤5000	1342	28.7
	5000<x≤10000	1879	40.2
	10000<x≤20000	1046	22.4
	> 20000	409	8.7

#### 3.2 Variables and Measurement

##### 3.2.1 Childhood socioeconomic status

The measurement question items for childhood socioeconomic status were derived from the study of Belsky, Schlomer, & Ellis (2012) [10] with four question items. The measurements were taken on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly

agree), and subjects were asked to recall their childhood experiences, with positive coding to capture the respondents' perceptions, as shown in Table 2. The Cronbach's alpha for the entire variable measure was 0.870, greater than the threshold value of 0.7; for each

question item, the corrected item-total correlation exceeds the threshold value of 0.4. Thus, it seems that the measurement of childhood SES has high reliability.

The status of the data for each item is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Items for Measuring Childhood Socioeconomic Status and Their Reliability about the Overall Scale**

No.	Items	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
1	When I was growing up, my family usually had enough money to buy things (using middle school as a recall standard)	0.701	0.843
2	I felt relatively wealthy compared to the other kids at school(using middle school as a recall standard)	0.766	0.818
3	I grew up in a relatively affluent neighborhood (using middle school as a recall standard)	0.748	0.824
4	When I was a child, my parents were of high socioeconomic status in the area (using middle school as a recall standard)	0.681	0.851

### 3.2.2 Self-efficacy

This study employed two questions to gauge Self-efficacy, utilizing a five-point scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree) with positively coded responses to capture respondents' perceptions, as illustrated in Table 3 below. The Cronbach's Alpha for the

overall variable measurement is 0.543, surpassing the threshold of 0.7. Moreover, for each question item, the Corrected Item-Total Correlation values are all above the threshold of 0.4. Consequently, it can be inferred that the measurement of Self-efficacy exhibits a high level of reliability.

**Table 3. Items for Measuring Self-efficacy and their Reliability to the Overall Scale**

No.	Item	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
1	I can achieve most of the goals I set for myself.	0.567	0.889
2	When faced with a challenge-lending task, I believe I will complete it.	0.729	0.853
3	I believe that, as long as I am determined, any effort can lead to success.	0.747	0.849
4	I have the confidence to overcome many challenges.	0.794	0.838
5	I believe I can achieve outcomes that are important to me.	0.750	0.849

### 3.2.3 Career adaptability

This project set up 3 questions to test career adaptability. These 3 items were positively coded on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree) to obtain respondents' perceptions, as shown in Table 4 below. The Cronbach's Alpha for the entire

variable measure was 0.773, greater than the threshold value of 0.7, and the Corrected Item-Total Correlation for each question item corresponded to values greater than the threshold value of 0.4. Thus, it appears that the measure of career adaptability has a high degree of reliability.

**Table 4. Items for Measuring Career Adaptability and their Reliability to the Overall Scale**

No.	Items	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
1	How often do you plan for your future education?	0.582	0.713
2	How often do you plan your future work	0.699	0.588
3	How often do you plan for your future family?	0.540	0.767

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Sampling

The data was processed using SPSS version

26.0 to assess the influence of childhood socioeconomic status (SES) on the career adaptability among college students. Tabular representations of descriptive statistics and correlation analyses for pivotal variables are

provided in Table 5. Findings indicate that self-efficacy exhibits a strong positive correlation with both childhood SES ( $p < 0.01$ ) and career adaptability ( $p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, a notable positive correlation was discovered between career adaptability and childhood SES ( $p < 0.01$ ). correlation between career adaptability and childhood SES ( $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 5. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation**

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1 Childhood socioeconomic status	10.91	3.69	1.00	0.214**	0.166**
2 Self-efficacy	2.77	0.66	0.214**	1.00	0.303**
3 Career adaptability	3.33	0.82	0.166**	0.303**	1.00

\* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.00$

#### 4.2 The Mediating Effect of Self-efficacy

Utilizing the Bootstrap technique within SPSS 26.0, we aimed to explore the mediating role of self-efficacy in bridging the gap between university students' childhood socioeconomic status (SES) and their career adaptability. After adjusting for variables such as age, gender, household monthly income, and monthly expenses, we applied a 95% bias-corrected Bootstrapping procedure with a

resample size of 5,000 to estimate confidence intervals (CI). The outcomes of the mediation analysis involving self-efficacy are presented in Tables 6 and 7. A statistically significant direct effect of childhood SES on career adaptability was observed ( $\beta = 0.03$ ,  $t = 8.83$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). When incorporating self-efficacy as a mediating factor in the PROCESS macro, the direct effect persisted in significance ( $\beta = 0.03$ ,  $t = 8.83$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); the influence of childhood SES on self-efficacy was also significant ( $\beta = 0.06$ ,  $t = 12.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); as well as the effect of self-efficacy on career adaptability ( $\beta = 0.02$ ,  $t = 5.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, the Bootstrap CI for the indirect effect of self-efficacy on the childhood SES-career adaptability relationship spanned [0.0099, 0.0153] (refer to Table 7), excluding the value of zero. This suggests that self-efficacy serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between childhood SES and career adaptability, providing support for hypothesis H2. Combining the results of the direct and mediating effects, we conclude that childhood SES not only directly contributes to college students' career adaptability but also indirectly contributes to the relationship by increasing generalized self-efficacy

**Table 6. Examination of Mediation Effects**

Regression (N=4676)		Fitting index			Significance of coefficients	
outcome variable	predictive variable	R	R2	F	$\beta$	t
Career adaptability	Childhood Socioeconomic status	0.17	0.03	28.4	0.03	8.83*
	Gender				0.02	0.95*
	Grade				0.04	2.36
	Monthly living expenses				-0.01	-0.23
	Monthly family income				0.05	2.87*
	Self-efficacy	0.21	0.04	44.65		
Career adaptability	Childhood Socioeconomic status				0.06	12.58*
	Gender				0.00	2.86
	Grade				-0.01	-0.72
	Monthly living expenses				0.02	-0.56
	Monthly family income				1.42	
	Self-efficacy	0.32	0.10	86.6		
Career adaptability	Childhood Socioeconomic status				0.02	5.49*
	Self-efficacy				0.34	19.12*
	Gender				0.00	0.14
	Grade				0.04	2.48*
	Monthly living expenses				0.00	-0.08
	Monthly family income				0.04	2.57*

**Table 7. Mediating Effect Test in Process**

Mediator Variable	Coefficient	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Self-efficacy	0.0126	0.0014	0.0099	0.0153

#### 5. Conclusion and Discussion

This research explored how childhood socioeconomic status (SES) influences

university students' career adaptability, particularly emphasizing the mediating role of generalized self-efficacy. The findings from the data analysis confirmed the assumption that childhood SES has a positive effect on college students' career adaptability, with self-efficacy playing a mediating role. This could be attributed to the supportive environment created by childhood SES, which allows individuals to access more resources for personal growth and develop positive psychological characteristics like self-efficacy through observational learning. As a result, individuals with higher childhood SES may be better equipped to resist immediate temptations and plan for their future development.

1. Provide More Psychological Support and Resources: Schools and society should offer more psychological support and resources to help college students from different socioeconomic backgrounds better cope with the challenges of career adaptation. This may include psychological counseling services, support groups, and stress management training.

2. Enhance the Cultivation of Self-Efficacy: Schools and families can strengthen students' sense of self-efficacy by providing encouragement, support, and recognition. Educators and parents can promote students' confidence and self-efficacy by giving them challenging tasks, offering positive feedback, and providing opportunities for practical experience.

3. Offer Role Models and Mentorship Support: Schools can organize mentorship programs or introduce successful alumni as role models to provide guidance and support to students. This support can help students build confidence and enhance their self-efficacy during career adaptation.

4. Enhance Education and Training: Targeted education and training should be provided to college students, especially those from low-income families, to enhance their career adaptability. This may include career planning guidance, internship opportunities, and employment skills training.

5. Establish Support Networks: Support networks should be established for college students, including peers, teachers, counselors, and alumni, to provide emotional support, career advice, and social support. Such

networks can help students better cope with challenges and achieve success in their career development.

6. Promote Family Education: Family education should also cultivate children's self-efficacy and adaptability. Parents can help children better cope with challenges in career development by creating a positive family environment, encouraging participation in social activities, and fostering problem-solving skills.

7. Provide Economic Support and Equal Opportunities: Governments and social organizations should strive to provide economic support and equal opportunities to ensure all college students have equal opportunities for education and career development. This may include providing scholarships, loans, and internship opportunities.

Despite revealing the substantial mediating influence of self-efficacy on the relationship between childhood socioeconomic status (SES) and career adaptability among university students, this investigation has its confines and suggests avenues for enhancement in subsequent research. Initially, our research of the relationship between childhood SES and self-efficacy did not account for other potential mediating factors like psychological resilience or coping strategies, indicating a need for deeper exploration in future studies. Secondly, the study's use of a cross-sectional design hinders our ability to establish causation, underscoring the importance of employing longitudinal designs in future research for a more precise understanding of the interrelationships among variables. Moreover, due to the predominant inclusion of Chinese participants in the sample, conducting cross-cultural studies could offer a more comprehensive insight into this mediating process. Thus, future research should consider utilizing diverse research methodologies and cross-cultural participant samples to tackle these limitations and advance our comprehension of how self-efficacy influences the impact of childhood socioeconomic status on career adaptability in college students.

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