

Poverty Stifles Ambition: The Role of Self-Efficacy and Perceived Social Fairness in the Future Orientation of Adolescents from Financially Disadvantaged Families

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Abstract

Although there is substantial evidence that the family's financial situation influences the development of adolescents' future orientation, little is known about the influencing mechanism. This study examined the potential mediating effects of self-efficacy (SE) and perceived social fairness (PSF) in the relationship between family financial difficulties (FFD) and future orientation (FO) with two independent samples of Chinese adolescents. In Study 1, a total of 1,527 adolescents (762 girls; mean age = 14.81 years, $SD = 1.70$) were recruited to complete a multi-section questionnaire. The results indicated that FFD significantly and negatively predicted FO. SE and PSF significantly mediated the relationship between FFD and FO both independently and sequentially. To test whether the above results are stable and replicable, we further conducted a validation study in Study 2 ($N = 410$) and found all the

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results remained significant. Implications for future research and limitations are discussed.

Keywords

family financial difficulties, future orientation, self-efficacy, perceived social fairness

Introduction

Future orientation refers to an individual's thinking and planning for the future (Nurmi, 1991). Specifically, it consists of three components: (a) how often individuals think about the future and whether they think about the future from a long-term perspective (cognitive dimension); (b) whether the individual can plan and carry out the plan if a specific goal is set (dimension of will action); and (c) whether the individual is optimistic about the future (emotional dimension) (Liu et al., 2011). Numerous studies have reported that adolescents with a higher level of future orientation show better academic performance, well-being, and social adjustment (Andre et al., 2018; Carvalho, 2015; J. B. Li, 2020).

There is a long history in psychological research that has examined the relationship between a family's financial situation and adolescents' future orientation. Previous studies have provided evidence that adolescents from lower social classes or families with financial difficulties tend to have a lower level of future orientations, such as thinking less or not being able to think about the future from a long-term perspective (Griskevicius et al., 2011; Klanjšek & Tement, 2019), lacking clear goals for the future (Nurmi, 1991; Voisin et al., 2020), and holding a more pessimistic outlook on the future (Threadgold, 2012). Though the literature is clear that family financial difficulties are negatively related to adolescents' future orientation; however, the specific mechanistic link between them remains unclear.

To provide empirical support for effective interventions to improve future orientation among financially disadvantaged adolescents, it is essential to explore this specific mechanism. The social cognitive theory of social class proposes that the differences in objective material resources and subjective perceptions of one self's social status led to the formation of different social classes (X. Y. Hu et al., 2016; Kraus et al., 2012). Families with financial difficulties belong to a lower social class, characterized by a lack of resources and an unstable and unpredictable living environment (Huston & Bentley, 2010). The social cognitive theory of social class suggests that individuals growing up in such a living environment are prone to have a specific social

cognitive pattern, mainly manifested in the perception of the internal self and external social world (Kraus et al., 2012). In this study, we selected self-efficacy as a factor of perceived self and perceived social fairness as a factor of perceived social environment, and considered these two factors as potentially mediating mechanisms in the relationship between family financial difficulties and future orientation.

The Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs concerning their ability to cope, perform, and be successful, and is considered as an indicator of self-perception (Judge & Bono, 2001). Individuals with higher self-efficacy believe that they can exercise control over their social surroundings (Bandura, 1997). The social cognitive theory of social class indicates that individuals from lower social classes frequently feel out of control of their life during their growth and are prone to have a low sense of control (Kraus et al., 2009, 2012). This makes them passive when in the face of external threats and therefore develop a low sense of self-efficacy (Janoff-Bulman, 2010).

While the role of self-efficacy in shaping future orientation has been long acknowledged (Johnson et al., 2014; Sugiyama & Kanda, 1996), researchers claimed that self-efficacy can be thought of as one's perceived ability to achieve a goal, and future orientation can be thought of as goal orientation (Epel et al., 1999). People who believe they can play a part in bringing about desired changes will be more dedicated to their futures (Locke & Latham, 1990). In contrast, those who distrust their ability to influence the path of events have little incentive to look to the future. Furthermore, according to self-efficacy theory, two ways of constructing self-efficacy are through the successes or failures of previous attempts or through vicarious experiences of others' successes or failures. If adolescents repeatedly fail or perceive their family members as failing frequently, they will be less likely to look at their futures optimistically or to exert effort to pursue their desired goals (Bandura, 1997). Based on the above literature, we therefore propose:

Hypothesis 1: Family financial difficulties negatively predict adolescents' self-efficacy, which further negatively affects future orientation.

The Mediating Role of Perceived Social Fairness

Perceived social fairness refers to an individual's perception of how fair the social environment is; this includes, for instance, an individual's perceived fairness in rights, education, income distribution, social security, medical

treatment, employment, and so on (Zhang, 2009). Individuals' perceived social fairness usually stems from the objective social environment, but scholars point out that it is also influenced by personal factors, for instance, how individuals rationalize the gap when they find themselves economically weaker than others through social comparison (Adams, 1965; X. Y. Hu et al., 2016). The social cognitive theory of social class indicates that individuals from the lower class are more likely to attribute external causes to social phenomena (Kraus et al., 2009). For example, they are more likely to believe that the disparity between rich and poor is due to external factors such as political influence or discrimination, which leads to a lower perceived social fairness (Kraus et al., 2009; Whyte & Han, 2008).

While perceived social fairness—meaning individuals having the confidence that they will be treated fairly by others and their efforts will be rewarded—is the foundation for them to invest in their future (Laurin et al., 2011). The belief of just world theory states that individuals' belief that the world is a just place could motivate them to commit to long-term goals and perform goal-directed behaviors (Lerner, 1980). Such a theoretical perspective may also apply to the influence of perceived social fairness on future orientation. However, no studies have been conducted to examine this. Therefore, we expected that perceived social fairness significantly affects future orientation and could be a potential mediator in the relationship between family financial difficulties and future orientation. We propose:

Hypothesis 2: Family financial difficulties negatively predict adolescents' perceived social fairness, which further negatively affects future orientation.

The Multiple Mediation Model

Although both self-efficacy and perceived social fairness may explain the relationship between family financial difficulties and future orientation, the existing literature is unclear as to whether the two variables act relatively independently simultaneously (parallel mediating effect) or whether they work consecutively (sequential mediating effect). To thoroughly examine how family financial difficulties affect future orientation, sequential mediation was also considered in this study.

Although fewer studies have discussed the relationship between self-efficacy and perceived social fairness, some theoretical perspectives in the context of newcomer's organizational entry may help to establish the link between the two variables. Uncertainty management theory suggests that when faced with uncertainty (e.g., entering a new organization), individuals

are driven to develop fairness expectations of the new environment based on past experiences of (un)fairness (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002). This implies that individuals who have experienced more unfair experiences in the past are more likely to develop unfair expectations and have stronger unfair perceptions of the new environment. However, it has also been found that individuals with higher self-efficacy less influenced by past unfair experiences (Jordan et al., 2022). This is because individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to believe that past unfair experiences are limited to specific situations and are not representative of the future (Samantha et al., 2022). Accordingly, we expected that self-efficacy could be a positive predictor of fairness perception. We therefore propose:

Hypothesis 3: Self-efficacy and perceived social fairness would sequentially mediate the association of family financial difficulties with future orientation.

The Present Study

In the present study, we used two independent samples to explore the mechanisms by which family financial difficulties affect future orientation. In Study 1, we carried out a multiple mediation analysis to test the mediating effects of self-efficacy and perceived social fairness on the relationship between family financial difficulties and future orientation in sample 1. In Study 2, we took a different approach to collect data (offline questionnaire) than in Study 1 (online questionnaire) to verify the reproducibility of the study findings.

Study 1

Method

Participants. The survey was administered to a total of 1,600 adolescents in Jinchang, Gansu Province, China (April 2022). First, we randomly contacted three junior high schools and one high school. Then, we randomly selected several classes from each grade in each school. The questionnaires were distributed online. Among collected questionnaires, those with an online response time under 3 minutes were excluded ($N=14$). In addition, questionnaires with a large number of unfilled items ($N=54$) and those that selected the same responses for most items ($N=5$) were excluded. A total of 1,527 valid questionnaires were finally used for analysis (95.4% valid questionnaire rate). The sample was roughly evenly split for gender (752 boys, 762 girls, and 13 missing gender information). The age range was 12–19 years ($M=14.81$, $SD=1.70$).

There was considerable variability in the socioeconomic status of the respondents, as indicated by their parents' reported education level (36.5% and 44.3% of fathers and mothers, respectively, had less than a high school/junior high school/vocational school education) and employment status (25.4% and 33.8% of fathers and mothers, respectively, had no regular job or were farmers).

Measures

To assess the reliability of each measure, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated. Values of the coefficient that were higher than 0.7 were considered acceptable (Peterson, 1994). In addition, confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine the construct validity of each measure. The ratio of χ^2 to degrees-of-freedom (df) (χ^2/df) was used as an indicator of overall model fit, and a value of 5 or less indicates a good fit. Since this indicator is susceptible to the influence of sample size (L. T. Hu & Bentler 1999), several other indices were also calculated for this study, including the goodness of fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). For the GFI, AGFI, NFI, and CFI statistics, values greater than .90 indicate a good model fit. For the RMSEA, a value of .08 indicates a reasonable fit (Byrne, 2001).

Family financial difficulties. We used the *Family's Financial Difficulties Scale* (FFDS) revised by J. P. Wang et al. (2010), which was referenced from the Perceived Economic Strain Scale (Wadsworth & Compas, 2002). A total of four items were used to measure family economic strain in four areas: clothing, food, housing, and transportation (e.g., "my family does not have enough money to buy new clothes"). The participants were asked to report the frequency of family economic strain in the past year. All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = never and 5 = always). The FFDS demonstrated a clear one-factor structure ($\chi^2/\text{df}=7.98$, CFI=0.99, GFI=0.99, AGFI=0.98, NFI=0.99, RMSEA=0.06), and the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the scale was 0.92 in this study.

Future orientation. We used the Chinese version of the *Future Orientation Scale* (FOS) (Liu et al., 2011), which consists of 31 items (e.g., "I often think about things to do in the future") to assess three sub-dimensions: cognition (9 items, $\alpha=0.83$), emotions (10 items, $\alpha=0.88$), and behavior (12 items, $\alpha=0.86$). All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = completely inconsistent, 5 = completely consistent). The FOS demonstrated acceptable structural

validity ($\chi^2/df=6.84$, CFI=0.90, GFI=0.89, AGFI=0.87, NFI=0.89, RMSEA=0.06), and the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the scale was 0.92.

Self-efficacy. We used the *General Self-Efficacy Scale* (GSES) developed by Luszczynska et al. (2005). C. K. Wang et al. (2001) translated and revised the Chinese version of the scale. It consists of 10 items (e.g., “I can always solve problems if I do my best”) and a single dimension. All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = completely inconsistent, 5 = completely consistent). The GSES demonstrated a clear one-factor structure ($\chi^2/df=9.51$, CFI=0.99, GFI=0.99, AGFI=0.97, NFI=0.99, RMSEA=0.08), and the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the scale was 0.88.

Perceived social fairness. We used the *Adolescent’s Perceived Social Fairness Scale* (APSFS) developed by Zhang (2009), which consists of 35 items (e.g., “Society has a relatively sound legal system”) and five sub-dimensions: system justice (9 items, $\alpha=0.92$), rights justice (7 items, $\alpha=0.90$), disadvantage justice (8 items, $\alpha=0.92$), interactional justice (7 items, $\alpha=0.89$), and distributive justice (4 items, $\alpha=0.77$). All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = completely inconsistent, 5 = completely consistent). Due to the sample size and the complexity of the model, the goodness of fit for APSFS were marginal at best in this study: $\chi^2/df=12.56$, CFI=0.83, GFI=0.78, AGFI=0.74, NFI=0.82, RMSEA=0.08, and the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the scale was 0.97.

Procedures and Statistical Analysis

The parents were informed of the purpose of the study prior to the enrollment of their children. Verbal assent was received from the participating adolescents. The online questionnaire survey was conducted during class time in the school’s computer room. Before completing the questionnaire, all participants were informed of its anonymity and the fact that it would not interfere with or influence their academic performance.

Data analyses were performed using SPSS 28 and AMOS 27. Mean imputation was conducted in the case of missing data. First, we conducted descriptive statistics analysis and Pearson correlation analysis to gain a preliminary overview of the study variables. Second, we tested the mediating roles of self-efficacy and perceived social fairness by using structural equation modeling (SEM). In addition, a bootstrap method was performed with 5,000 samples to test the significance of the mediating effects. Conventionally, the indirect effect of each variable is significant if a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (CI) does not contain 0 (Cheung & Lau, 2008).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Main Variables ($N=1,527$).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Family financial difficulties	1.98	1.10	1			
2. Self-efficacy	3.56	0.65	-.12**	1		
3. Perceived social fairness	4.14	0.69	-.22**	.38**	1	
4. Future orientation	3.60	0.61	-.25**	.63**	.43**	1

Note. *M* = means; *SD* = standard deviations.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the main study variables. Overall, family financial difficulties was negatively correlated with future orientation, self-efficacy, and perceived social fairness with correlation coefficients ranging from -0.12 to -0.25 . In addition, self-efficacy, perceived social fairness, and future orientation had significant and positive correlations with each other, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.38 to 0.63 .

In the above analysis results, future orientation showed a high correlation with self-efficacy ($r=0.63$), which made us question the independence and distinguishability of the two variables. Although we found in previous studies that future orientation was also highly correlated with self-efficacy ($r=0.43-0.64$) (Azizli et al., 2015; Dutt & Wahl, 2019; Kerpelman & Mosher, 2004), in the present study we employed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the discriminant validity of the two variables. First, the results of EFA revealed that all 10 items for self-efficacy had factor loadings greater than 0.45 loading well on one factor, and none of the items cross-loaded on factors for future orientation (secondary maximum factor loadings were all below 0.23). Second, the results of the CFA showed that the two-factor model was significantly better than the fit of the one-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2(1, N=1,527)=2,088.40, p < .001$).

The Mediating Effects of Self-efficacy and Perceived Social Fairness

The Pearson correlation matrix indicated family financial difficulties was significantly and negatively correlated to future orientation ($p < .01$). To

further examine the mediating effects of self-efficacy and perceived social fairness between family financial difficulties and future orientation, we used SEM with AMOS. To control for scale instability and inflated measurement error caused by multiple items with latent variables, the SEM item parceling proposed by Y. Wu and Wen (2011) was used. In other words, the two multi-dimensional variables of perceived social fairness and future orientation were parceled according to their dimensional attribution to the corresponding entries, and the uni-dimensional variable of self-efficacy was parceled based on item-to-construct balancing procedures.

We first constructed the direct effect model with the family financial difficulties as the independent variable and future orientation as the dependent variable. The fit of the direct model was good ($\chi^2/df=3.01$, CFI=0.99, GFI=0.98, AGFI=0.94, NFI=0.98, RMSEA=0.07); and the path coefficient between family financial difficulties and future orientation was significant ($\beta=-0.25$, $p<.001$), meaning that the variable of family financial difficulties is a significant predictor of future orientation.

Next, we assigned self-efficacy and perceived social fairness as mediating variables, family financial difficulties as the independent variable, and future orientation as the dependent variable, to establish a multiple mediation model. Q1–Q4 = the four items' score of family financial difficulties; Self_1–Self_3 = three parcels of self-efficacy; *Cognition*, *Emotion*, and *Behavior* represent the three sub-dimensions of future orientation; *disadvantage*, *rights*, *system*, *interaction*, and *distribution* were the five sub-dimensions of perceived social fairness. The fit of the model was acceptable: $\chi^2/df=5.63$, CFI=0.98, GFI=0.96, AGFI=0.94, NFI=0.97, RMSEA=0.06. The results showed that all of the path coefficients were significant (Figure. 1).

To test the significance levels of the indirect effects, bootstrap estimation procedures were conducted with a 95% confidence interval (Table 2). The results indicated that the total indirect effect of family financial difficulties on future orientation was significant (estimate=-0.127; Bootstrap 95% CI [-0.176, -0.080]), which accounted for 44% of the total effects. Specifically, the effect of the path $FFD \rightarrow SE \rightarrow FO$ was -0.077 (Bootstrap 95% CI [-0.118, -0.037]) and accounted for 26% of the total effects. The effect of the path $FFD \rightarrow PSF \rightarrow FO$ was -0.042 (Bootstrap 95% CI [-0.059, -0.029]) and accounted for 15% of the total effects. The effect of the path $FFD \rightarrow SE \rightarrow PSF \rightarrow FO$ was -0.008 (Bootstrap 95% CI [-0.014, -0.004]), accounting for 3% of the total effects. Because the confidence intervals of all three mediated paths did not contain 0, the mediating effects of all three paths were significant. Furthermore, the mediating effect contrast tests found the

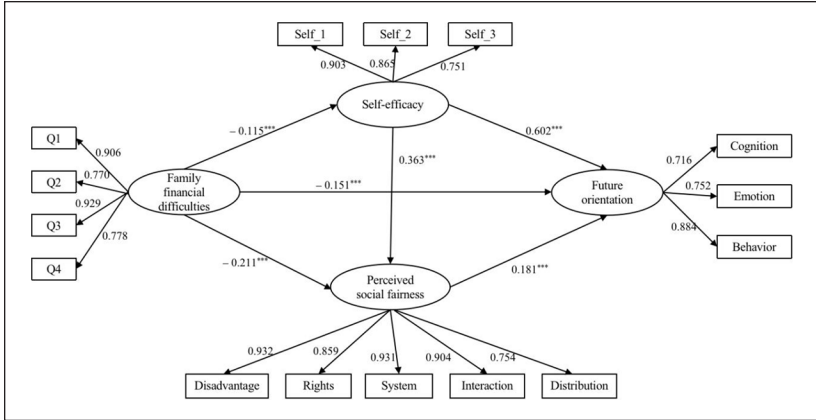


Figure 1. Multiple mediation model.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Standardized Indirect Effects and 95% Bias-corrected Confidence Intervals.

Pathways	Estimate	Percentage	Bootstrap [95% CI]
Total effect	-0.290	100	[-0.357, -0.230]
Total indirect effect	-0.127	44	[-0.176, -0.080]
Indirect effect 1			
FFD→SE→FO	-0.077	26	[-0.118, -0.037]
Indirect effect 2			
FFD→PSF→FO	-0.042	15	[-0.059, -0.029]
Indirect effect 3			
FFD→SE→PSF→FO	-0.008	3	[-0.014, -0.004]

Note. FFD = family financial difficulties; SE = self-efficacy; PSF = perceived social fairness; FO = future orientation.

mediating effect of self-efficacy had no significant difference from that of perceived social fairness (estimate = -0.034, 95% CI = [-0.078, 0.008]).

Study 2

Method

Participants and procedure. In study 2, we recruited a total of 410 adolescents (368 junior high school students, 42 high school students; 202 boys,

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Main Variables ($N=410$).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Family financial difficulties	2.05	1.12	1			
2. Self-efficacy	3.57	0.67	-.16**	1		
3. Perceived social fairness	4.14	0.70	-.26**	.39**	1	
4. Future orientation	3.62	0.63	-.28**	.67**	.48**	1

Note. *M* = means; *SD* = standard deviations.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

207 girls; age range = 12–19, mean age = 14.83, $SD = 1.74$) from a junior high school and a high school in the city of Jinchang. Verbal informed consents were obtained from all participants. Data were collected by using paper and pencil assessments in a quiet classroom environment.

Measures

The same measures related to family financial difficulties, self-efficacy, perceived social fairness, and future orientation were used in Study 2. Cronbach's alphas for measures related to family financial difficulties, self-efficacy, perceived social fairness, and future orientation in this study were 0.92, 0.90, 0.97, and 0.94, respectively.

Data analysis

The same analysis method was used in Study 2.

Results

Bivariate Analysis

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for all variables. The results suggested that family financial difficulties was negatively correlated with self-efficacy, perceived social fairness, and future orientation ($ps < .01$); self-efficacy, perceived social fairness, and future orientation had significant positive correlations with each other ($ps < .01$).

Multiple Mediation Analysis

Similarly, we used multiple mediation analyses to examine the mediating role of self-efficacy and perceived social fairness in the link of family financial difficulties with future orientation. The results found that the mediating

effects of self-efficacy (estimate = -0.103 , 95% CI = $[-0.181, -0.032]$) and perceived social fairness (estimate = -0.058 , 95% CI = $[-0.099, -0.031]$) in the link of family financial difficulties with future orientation were significant. In addition, a path from family financial difficulties to future orientation through self-efficacy and perceived social fairness remained significant (estimate = -0.013 , 95% CI = $[-0.028, -0.004]$), revealing that the link of family financial difficulties with future orientation could be mediated by the sequential path of self-efficacy and perceived social fairness. Furthermore, the mediating effect contrast tests found the mediating effect of self-efficacy had no significant difference from that of perceived social fairness (estimate = -0.045 , 95% CI = $[-0.127, 0.030]$).

Discussion

The results showed that the direct effect of family financial difficulties on future orientation was significant, indicating that the more difficult the family's financial situation is, the lower level of the adolescents' future orientation is. This result supported the social phenomenon that *Poverty Stifles Ambition* in actual life (Shek et al., 2003) and was also consistent with previous conclusions (Nurmi, 1991; Threadgold, 2012). Previous studies have primarily been based on small, geographically constrained samples (thus resulting in conclusions that may not be generalizable or representative), whereas this study confirmed the effect of family financial situation on adolescents' future orientation based on large samples.

The results also revealed that self-efficacy significantly mediates the association between family financial difficulties and future orientation, which supported our Hypothesis 1. In the first part of the mediation process, family financial difficulties was negatively associated with self-efficacy. As the social cognitive theory of social class states, individuals from lower social classes have a lower sense of control due to the instability and uncertainty of their living environment, and are more likely to experience anxiety when faced with threats and difficulties, all of which lead to a lower self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982; Kraus et al., 2012). In the second part of this mediation process, self-efficacy was positively associated with future orientation, which supported the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) and was consistent with previous studies (Bi et al., 2022; Kim, 2019). Numerous case-based studies have reported that individuals from poor families experience more frustration growing up, resulting in low self-efficacy and therefore tend to overestimate the difficulty of achieving future goals (Abe, 2012; Hayashi, 2016).

The results of the present study also suggested that the perceived social fairness mediates the association between family financial difficulties and future orientation, which supported Hypothesis 2. In the first part of this mediation process, family financial difficulties was negatively associated with perceived social fairness, supporting the social cognitive theory of social class (Kraus et al., 2012). Lower-class individuals tend to make external attributions to the disparity between rich and poor due to their low sense of control, resulting in a lower perception of social fairness (Whyte & Han, 2008). A few empirical studies have also suggested that lower-classes individuals are more likely to perceive themselves as being treated unfairly and have greater physiological responses to the threat of unfairness than individuals from higher classes (S. X. Li, 2014). In the second part of this mediation process, perceived social fairness was positively associated with future orientation, which supported the belief of just world theory (Lerner, 1980) and was consistent with previous studies (J. B. Li, 2020; Schoon & Mortimer, 2017; M. S. Wu et al., 2013). Individuals from lower classes have fewer resources and are more dependent on the external environment in pursuing their goals, so their perception of fairness in the social environment plays a more important role in their goal-directed behavior (X. Y. Hu et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2021). When they perceive the social environment to be fair, they have more optimistic expectations for the future (Roh, 2021); otherwise, they will give up delayed bigger rewards for smaller immediate rewards (Bal & van den Bos, 2012).

According to the multiple mediation model, family financial difficulties could also be associated with future orientation through a sequential mediating effect involving self-efficacy and perceived social fairness, which supported Hypothesis 3. More specifically, family financial difficulties leads to lower self-efficacy among adolescents, which in turn negatively affects perceived social fairness and ultimately leads to lower future orientation. Previous studies have verified that self-efficacy is positively associated with fairness perceptions in the context of newcomer's organizational entry (Jordan et al., 2022; Samantha et al., 2022; VanYperen, 1998). The results of this study supported it and further extended this conclusion, as the perception of fairness in this study was for the overall social environment rather than the specific organization. Adolescents from financially disadvantaged families with higher self-efficacy can positively interpret and attribute past unfairness experiences, thus maintaining higher perceptions of social fairness and ultimately promoting future orientations.

Since the psychology field has recently been proclaimed to be experiencing a replication crisis (Patil et al., 2016), we tried to determine whether or not our findings were consistent and reproducible. We found that all the

results remained significant when applied to a different, independent sample. Specifically, family financial difficulties could indirectly predict future orientation through self-efficacy and perceived social fairness, as well as through the sequential mediating effect of self-efficacy and perceived social fairness. Thus, our results reported here are stable and replicable.

Implications for Practice

According to the findings of this study, several intervention strategies may theoretically improve the future orientation of adolescents from financially disadvantaged families and are worth examining in more research. First, the self-efficacy of adolescents from financially disadvantaged families can be intervened to indirectly enhance their future orientation. Previous researches have shown that elevated social support (Misawa, 2013) and the self-affirmation method (Steele, 1988) can significantly enhance self-efficacy and therefore theoretically contribute to future orientation.

Second, it has been shown that enhancing the sense of control among low social class individuals can reduce their external attribution tendencies and thus improve their perception of social fairness (Kraus et al., 2009). Therefore, enhancing the sense of control of adolescents from financially disadvantaged families is important for promoting their future orientation. Moreover, some scholars have pointed out that based on experimental studies, reducing social condition restrictions (e.g., reducing the complexity of application procedures for social assistance) and providing more opportunities for upward mobility for low-class individuals can also enhance their perceived social fairness (J. B. Li, 2014; Whyte & Han, 2008), which theoretically contributes to improving the future orientation of adolescents.

Limitations

The present study is certainly not without limitations. First, as the study was a cross-sectional design, causal connections between the variables should be drawn with caution. Future longitudinal or experimental studies will facilitate more causal evaluations. Second, although one strength of this study was the large sample size, the sample only consisted of adolescents from Chinese culture. Future studies should test whether the mediation model can be replicated in populations from other cultural backgrounds. Third, some personal dimensions such as resilience (Chen et al., 2021) may influence the relationship between family financial difficulties and future orientation, and future research should explore the relationship between the two while controlling for these variables.

Conclusion

In summary, this study made the first attempt to test the underlying mediational mechanisms (i.e., self-efficacy and perceived social fairness) through which family financial difficulties affect adolescents' future orientation. The findings provide support for different pathways through which family financial difficulties affect future orientation, namely the mediating and serial mediating roles of self-efficacy and perceived social fairness. Previous related theories explain how poverty stifles ambition mainly from the perspective of macro-social structure and cultural environment (Lewis, 2017; Sen, 1981; Small, 2010), whereas this study provides a new theoretical perspective, that is, the specific social cognitive pattern among adolescents from lower social classes, for understanding this social phenomenon. On a practical level, adolescents from financially disadvantaged families need to set ambitious aspirations and goals for the future if they want to change their fate. Unlike previous studies based on a macro perspective, the findings obtained based on the analytical perspective of this study can provide specific and practical intervention options for parents, teachers, and other educational stakeholders.

Authors' Contribution

Jingjing Chen was responsible for completing the material preparation, data analysis, and writing the first draft of the manuscript. Xiaoyu Guo was responsible for data collection. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Ethical Approval

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of Nanjing Forestry University prior to the commencement of the study. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Data availability

The data sets generated for this study are available on request to the corresponding author.

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