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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A study of the impact of cultural cognitive conflict on career expectations--Tracking survey on employment psychology of minority economics graduates in northwest China

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the impact of cultural cognitive conflicts on the career expectations of economics graduates from ethnic minorities in Northwest China, and analyzes the key factors affecting their psychological characteristics of employment based on multi-channel tracking survey data for the period from 2015 to 2023. It is found that ethnic minority graduates in Northwest China show obvious geographical and industry differentiation in their employment choices, in which cultural cognitive differences play an important role. By constructing a gray correlation model with dynamic tracking data, the relationship between multidimensional factors such as linguistic-symbolic differences, value conflicts, and occupational cognitive differences and career expectations was analyzed. The results show that career cognitive differences have the highest correlation with career expectations, reaching 0.846, indicating that the interface between education and market demand is crucial. In addition, linguistic-symbolic differences and conflicting values significantly influenced graduates' employment choices and salary expectations. The study also put forward five propositions to verify the dynamic association between cultural cognitive conflicts and career expectations, emphasizing the importance of strengthening cultural adaptation and cognitive matching in career development.

Keywords: cultural cognitive conflict; career expectations; ethnic minorities; economics; graduates; employment psychology

1. Introduction

In the context of accelerated globalization, cultural cognitive conflict has become an important factor affecting individual career development, especially in multi-ethnic areas. Northwest China, as an ethnic minority region in China, has seen the number of graduates majoring in economics increase year by year[1]. However, these graduates often face challenges brought about by differences in cultural perceptions during the employment process, resulting in a significant gap between their career expectations and actual employment status[2]. Many ethnic minority graduates not only have to overcome the language barrier, but also need to adapt to different workplace cultures and values during the job search process. This cultural

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cognitive conflict not only affects their career choices and development paths, but also has a profound impact on their psychological health and career satisfaction[3]. Therefore, it is of great theoretical and practical significance to study in depth the impact of cultural cognitive conflict on the career expectations of economics graduates from ethnic minorities in Northwest China.

In Western countries, research on cultural cognitive conflict and career development is more mature, especially on workplace adaptation in multicultural environments[4]. Studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between cultural adaptability and career success, and cross-cultural management theory also provides theoretical support for understanding this phenomenon[5]. There are relatively few studies on cultural cognitive conflict in China, but in recent years, with the attention to the employment of ethnic minority economics graduates, the number of related studies has gradually increased. The research mainly focuses on the employment choice, career development and psychological adaptation of minority students[6]. Some scholars have explored the differences in career perceptions in different cultural contexts, pointing out the effects of language barriers and cultural identity on career expectations[7]. However, systematic studies are still insufficient, especially lacking in in-depth analysis for ethnic minority graduates in Northwest China.

Current research mostly focuses on descriptive analysis and lacks a systematic theoretical framework to explain how cultural cognitive conflicts specifically affect career expectations. In-depth exploration of the influence mechanism is still insufficient. Existing studies are often limited to a certain region or university in terms of sample selection, resulting in limited generalizability of the findings[8]. There is a lack of comparative studies on different minority groups, which cannot fully reflect the current employment situation in the Northwest China. Most of the current studies use cross-sectional survey methods, lack of dynamic tracking of graduates' career development, and are unable to reveal the long-term impact of cultural cognitive conflicts on changes in career expectations[9]. The research on cultural cognitive conflicts and career expectations of economics graduates from ethnic minorities in Northwest China needs to be further deepened in order to provide more effective theoretical support and practical guidance for the formulation of relevant policies and the implementation of vocational training.

2. Employment of northwest minority economics graduates current status

In recent years, the number of minority graduates majoring in economics cultivated by colleges and universities in Northwest China has been steadily increasing, but the employment path and career development show a unique phenomenon[10]. Taking a university in Gansu Province as an example, among the ethnic minority economics students who graduated in the last three years, about 40% chose to return to their hometowns for employment, mainly into local banks, agricultural and animal husbandry cooperatives, or grassroots governmental departments; 30% flowed to the eastern coastal cities, engaging in foreign trade, logistics, or SMEs' financial positions; and the remaining 30% were in the state of staying in the job or frequently changing jobs. A Tibetan graduate from Qinghai mentioned that when he was interviewed by a private enterprise in Xi'an, he was repeatedly mistaken for an "introvert" because he was unfamiliar with the communication habits of his Han Chinese colleagues, and ultimately missed out on a job opportunity.

Behind the divergence in the field of employment lies the influence of differences in cultural perceptions. In Northwest China, ethnic minority graduates are more inclined to choose positions with a high degree of cultural relevance, such as e-commerce operations for ethnic specialty products and poverty alleviation project planning in pastoral areas. More than half of the Uyghur graduates from a university in Xinjiang are employed in the "Ethnic Area Economic Development Department" of a local state-owned enterprise, which is responsible for the implementation of industrial policies in areas where ethnic minorities have gathered. In the eastern cities, some companies recognize their professional ability, but have concerns

about cross-cultural collaboration. A Hui girl working in Shanghai confessed that the drinking culture at the company's annual meeting made her feel uncomfortable, and she had to repeatedly weigh between "integrating into the collective" and "maintaining ethnic habits". The gap between career expectations and realistic treatment is widespread. While many graduates have the ideal of "revitalizing their hometowns with knowledge of economics" during their studies, the actual work content of grassroots positions is often limited to filling out data reports or conveying policy documents, which is far from the "innovation of the national economy" that they envisioned. A graduate from Ningxia who worked in a county finance bureau mentioned that the "tourism + animal husbandry" program he designed was shelved because the higher-level departments were more interested in short-term economic indicators, which made him doubt the value of his career. At the same time, some graduates who choose to work in big cities face hidden barriers. For example, some financial institutions prefer to hire candidates who are "familiar with mainstream business culture", and a Mongolian graduate was not retained during his internship at a securities firm in Hangzhou because he did not understand the rules of human interaction in the local business community.

3. Research design on the impact of cultural cognitive conflict on career expectations

3.1. Data sources

In order to enhance the transparency and rigor of the research design, this section clarifies the research objectives, data collection process and analysis methods in detail. This study utilizes a mixed research methodology that combines quantitative tracking data with qualitative interviews in order to comprehensively analyze the impact of cultural cognitive conflict on the career aspirations of Northwest minority economics graduates. The objectives of the study include: verifying the dynamic association between cultural cognitive conflicts (linguistic-symbolic differences, value conflicts, career cognitive differences, etc.) and career expectations; identifying the paths of the key influencing factors and their temporal evolution patterns; and proposing policy recommendations to promote cultural adaptation and career matching. The tracking data covers 2015-2023, and the representativeness and reliability of the data is ensured through the following multiple sources (see **Table 1**):

Table 1. Description of data sources.

Data category	Data sources
Psychological dynamics of graduate employment, 2015-2023	Annual report on the quality of employment in colleges and universities in the five northwestern provinces
Cultural Adaptation Level Measurement 2015-2023	Ethnic Education Development Center, Ministry of Education
Career Expectancy Scale Data 2015-2023	Subject Group Fieldwork
Cultural Inclusiveness of Employers, 2015-2023	Zhonghua Yingcai Corporate Social Responsibility Report
Certification of bilingual competence, 2015-2023	Department of Language and Culture of the State People's Committee
Frequency of intercultural communication, 2015-2023	Graduate Employment Tracking System
Differences in professional values, 2015-2023	China University Student Employment Survey Database

In this study, Grey Relational Analysis (GRA) was used as it is suitable for the analysis of small sample, multivariate and dynamic tracking data, and can effectively capture the nonlinear relationship between cultural cognitive conflict and career aspirations. The steps of model construction are as follows:

Data standardization: Eliminate the difference in scale and use the mean value method to process the raw data;

Correlation calculation: quantify the dynamic association between variables by difference series and correlation coefficient formula;

Weight allocation: determining the core influencing factors based on the order of contribution.

This method directly serves the research objectives and reveals the long-term influence mechanism of cultural conflicts through time series analysis, which makes up for the shortcomings of cross-sectional studies.

3.2. Research indicators

Career expectation (Y) is used as the core observation indicator, which is measured comprehensively through three dimensions: geographical choice of employment, salary expectation, and industry preference.

Cultural Cognitive Conflict Contains:

Linguistic Symbolic Differences (X1): Bilingual Competency Certification Levels and Workplace Language Matching

Conflict of Values (X2): Matching Index between Traditional National Values and Modern Values in the Workplace

Differences in career perceptions (X3): fit between schooling perceptions and employer needs

Social pattern distance (X4): level of adaptation of ethnic social habits and norms of workplace interaction

Development expectation gap (X5): the degree of harmonization between individual career planning and corporate promotion mechanism

3.3. Variable correlation analysis

Gray correlation models with dynamic tracking data were used to measure the interaction effects of multidimensional variables.

Table 2. Correlation matrix of cultural cognitive elements.

variant	Y	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5
Y	1	0.812	0.783	0.846	0.754	0.791
X1	0.812	1	0.653	0.728	0.697	0.715
X2	0.783	0.653	1	0.694	0.732	0.708
X3	0.846	0.728	0.694	1	0.763	0.802
X4	0.754	0.697	0.732	0.763	1	0.657
X5	0.791	0.715	0.708	0.802	0.657	1

Data analysis shows that the correlation between career cognitive differences (X3) and career expectations (Y) reaches 0.846, reflecting the key role of the interface between education and training and market demand. Linguistic-symbolic differences (X1) became a basic influence factor with a correlation of 0.812, and values conflict (X2) showed deep cultural tension through a correlation of 0.783. There was a moderate correlation of 0.65-0.80 among the cultural cognitive elements, constituting a composite network of effects.

3.4. Research propositions

Proposition 1 The intensity of cultural cognitive conflict is positively related to the frequency of career expectation adjustment Proposition 2 The degree of linguistic symbolic difference positively affects the

geographic concentration of career choice Proposition 3 For every 10% increase in career cognitive match, the reasonableness of salary expectation increases by 23% Proposition 4 The level of social pattern adaptation moderates the willingness to be employed in private enterprises Proposition 5 Developmental expectation fallout exceeding a threshold will trigger career planning reconstruction behavior

The research framework reveals the dynamic shaping mechanism of cultural cognitive elements on career expectations through time-tracing data. Among them, career cognitive differences serve as the core mediating variables connecting education and training with market demands, linguistic and symbolic differences constitute the basic constraints, and value conflicts generate the continuous tension of influence.

4. Analysis of model empirical results

4.1. Multicollinearity test

The problem of multicollinearity between variables is assessed by variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance index. Tolerance reflects the independence of variables, taking the value range of 0-1, the closer the value is to 1, the stronger the independence; VIF measures the severity of covariance, usually with 10 as the critical value.

Table 3. Covariance diagnostic results.

variant	Standardized coefficient	t-value	significance	tolerances	variance inflation factor
constant term (math.)	0.000	-	-	-	-
X1	0.342	4.752	0.001	0.122	8.203
X2	-0.218	-3.09	0.008	0.185	5.405
X3	0.598	6.831	0.000	0.314	3.185
X4	0.154	2.014	0.062	0.276	3.623
X5	-0.107	-1.45	0.169	0.258	3.876

The data showed that the variance inflation factors for linguistic-symbolic differences (X1) and occupational cognitive differences (X3) were 8.203 and 3.185, respectively, which had moderate covariance problems but did not exceed the critical threshold. The tolerance of values conflict (X2) is 0.185, showing its strong explanatory independence and the model as a whole can pass the test.

4.2. Main effects regression analysis

The partial least squares regression method was used to construct the path of cultural cognitive conflict on career expectations, and the core influence factors were extracted after standardizing the data.

Table 4. Contribution to variance of latent variables.

latent variable	X variance explained	Y variance explained	Cumulative X variance	Cumulative Y variance
F1	62.37%	78.24%	62.37%	78.24%
F2	21.05%	12.86%	83.42%	91.10%
F3	9.81%	5.03%	93.23%	96.13%

The first latent variable, F1, focused on the synergistic effect of career cognitive differences (X3) and linguistic-symbolic differences (X1), explaining 78.24% of the variance in career expectations. The second latent variable, F2, centered on values conflict (X2) and complementarily explained 12.86% of the variance

in the dependent variable. Cumulatively, the two factors cover 91.1% of the path of action and the explanatory power of the model is significant.

4.3. Dynamic moderating effects

A time-series impact table is constructed from the tracking data to present the evolutionary pattern of the intensity of the role of cultural cognitive elements from 2015-2023.

Table 5. Time-series evolution of impact coefficients of cultural perception variables (standardized coefficients).

particular year	X1 Linguistic symbolic differences	X2 Conflicting values	X3 Differences in career perceptions	X4 Social Mode Distance	X5 Development expectations fall short
2015	0.28	0.31	0.55	0.11	-0.09
2017	0.33	0.29	0.58	0.15	-0.12
2019	0.36	0.34	0.61	0.19	-0.15
2021	0.39	0.27	0.62	0.22	-0.17
2023	0.41	0.25	0.63	0.23	-0.18

The impact coefficient of linguistic-symbolic differences (X1) fluctuates from 0.28 to 0.41, showing that workplace language barriers continue to strengthen. The strength of the effect of Occupational Cognitive Differences (X3) stabilizes in the 0.55-0.62 range, becoming the most stable predictor. The moderating effect of Social Mode Distance (X4) increases significantly after 2019, with the coefficient climbing from 0.11 to 0.23, reflecting the intensification of intergenerational conflict over workplace interaction norms.

4.4. Results of hypothesis testing

The research propositions are tested based on the model parameters:

Table 6. Research proposition validation table.

The content of the questions	ratio	level of support
Cultural conflict intensity is positively related to the adjustment of career expectations	0.401	strong support
Linguistic differences drive geographic choice concentration	0.337	Partial support
Career Perception Matching Enhances Reasonableness of Salary Expectations	0.582	Full support
Social Adaptation Moderates Private Employment Intentions	0.214	weak support
Development gap triggers career planning reconstruction	-0.186	opposite support

The data confirms that for every 10% increase in career perception match, graduates' salary expectation deviation decreases by 19.7% ($p<0.01$). The negative coefficient of development expectation fallout (-0.186) indicates that 73% of the sample chose to choose a career across industries when the actual promotion opportunity was 23% lower than the expected value, inversely validating the threshold effect of proposition five.

5. Analysis of results

The results of this study are highly compatible with cross-cultural adaptation and career development theories. Occupational cognitive differences (X3) had the highest correlation (0.846) with occupational expectations, confirming the importance of the “education-market” interface. This finding is consistent with the literature[7] that “career cognitive dissonance exacerbates expectancy bias”, but furthermore, the dynamic data reveals the trend of its reinforcement over time. The linguistic-symbolic differences (X1) of the Northwest ethnic minority graduates were not only reflected in Chinese language proficiency, but also

involved adaptation barriers to non-linguistic symbols (e.g., business etiquette, digital communication habits). For example, a Tibetan graduate in the interview mentioned, "The frequent use of emoticons in WeChat communication confuses me, which affects the efficiency of teamwork." Such microcultural conflicts are manifested in the quantitative data as the X1 coefficient increases year by year (2015:0.28→2023:0.41), highlighting the unique challenges of ethnic minority groups in the cross-cultural workplace.

5.1. Main effect mechanism of action

The standardized coefficient of career cognitive differences (X3) is 0.598, explaining 62.37% of the variation in career expectations, which is the core path of the impact of cultural conflict. When the degree of career cognitive matching increases by 10%, the degree of salary expectation deviation of graduates decreases by 19.7%, indicating that the degree of integration between industry and education directly affects the psychological rationality of employment. The coefficient of linguistic symbolic difference (X1) is 0.342, and the willingness to cross-provincial employment decreases by 28% for every 1-unit increase in language adaptation barrier. Values conflict (X2) coefficient -0.218, showing that for every 1 level of intergenerational cultural tension, the willingness to be employed in private enterprises decreases by 14%.

Table 7. Decomposition of main effect explanatory contribution.

latent variable	The culture clash dimension	Career Expectations Interpretation Weighting
F1	Linguistic symbols + career awareness	78.24%
F2	clash of values	12.86%
F3	social conditioning	5.03%

5.2. Dynamic evolution patterns

The 2015-2023 tracking data show that the intensity of the role of cultural conflict shows a divergent trend. The influence coefficient of linguistic-symbolic differences (X1) grows by 4.6% annually and reaches 0.41 in 2023, reflecting the continuous deepening of the adaptation contradiction between the national language and the common language of the workplace. Occupational cognitive differences (X3) stably maintain a high fluctuation of 0.55-0.63, confirming the persistence of the lagging problem of integration of industry and education.

Table 8. Evolution of the intensity of the role of cultural elements (2015-2023).

particular year	X1 Language differences	X3 Career awareness	X4 Social Adaptation
2015	0.28	0.55	0.11
2019	0.36	0.61	0.19
2023	0.41	0.63	0.23

The strength of the impact of social mode distance (X4) doubles in nine years, with the coefficient rising to 0.23 in 2023, reflecting the intensification of intergenerational conflict over workplace interaction norms in the digital age. The coefficient of development expectation gap (X5) stabilizes in the range of -0.15 to -0.18, and 73% of the samples choose to choose careers across industries when the actual promotion opportunities are 23% lower than the expected value.

5.3. Findings of the propositional test

The research hypothesis testing shows that culture conflict intensity is significantly and positively related to career expectation adjustment with a coefficient of 0.401 confirming the dynamic association. The

coefficient of 0.337 for the driving effect of language differences on the centralization of geographic choices is 0.337, but only 38% of the sample showed a significant response due to the dialect protection policy.

Table 9. Results of validation of research propositions.

The content of the questions	intensity of action	Verification Status
Culture clash drives adjustments in career expectations	0.401	strong support
Linguistic differences reinforce the concentration of geographic options	0.337	Partial support
Career perception matching optimizes salary expectations	0.582	Full support
Social Adaptation Moderates Private Employment Intentions	0.214	weak support
Development gap triggers career planning reconstruction	-0.186	reverse engineering

The corrective effect of career perception match on salary expectation rationality amounted to 0.582, and every 10% increase in match could reduce the probability of over-expectation by 32%. The negative effect coefficient of -0.186 for developmental expectation fallout reveals that the 23% promotion fallout threshold is the critical point that triggers career planning reconfiguration.

The study confirms that linguistic barriers and occupational cognitive fault lines constitute a dual-core driving mechanism for culture clashes, with linguistic differences growing at the fastest rate of influence and occupational cognitive differences playing the largest role in the base. Values conflict generates persistent tension through intergenerational transmission, and the moderating effect of social adaptation factors is enhanced, suggesting that the mode of cultural integration in the workplace is undergoing a paradigm shift from unidirectional adaptation to bi-directional reconfiguration.concluding remarks

6. Conclusion

Cultural cognitive conflict affects career aspirations through a “dual path” - career cognitive differences (β=0.598) constitute a direct driver, while linguistic-symbolic differences (β=0.342) and values conflict (β=-0.218) have an indirect effect by moderating employment and geographic choices and firm fit. geographic choice and firm fitness have indirect effects. This study expands the application scenarios of cross-cultural management theory by emphasizing the need for ethnic minority graduates and employers to engage in cultural adaptation rather than unilateral assimilation. Colleges and universities need to add “workplace culture simulation courses” that combine traditional ethnic wisdom (e.g., Hui business culture) with modern economic cases to improve career cognitive fit; eastern enterprises should establish “ethnic culture mentorship” to reduce value conflicts through customized training (e.g., avoiding the imposition of drinking table culture). Eastern enterprises should establish a “national culture mentor system” to reduce value conflicts through customized training (e.g. avoiding the imposition of drinking table culture). However, although the sample of this study covers five provinces, it is not broken down into ethnic groups (e.g., Uyghur vs. Mongolian), so it is possible to compare the patterns of cultural conflicts among different ethnic groups in the future; the tracking period is limited to nine years, and it is recommended to extend it to 15 years to observe the effects of intergenerational change.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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