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Structured Abstract

Title

When Difference Is Invisible but Policy Is Not: Affirmative Action, Institutional Classification, and Academic Adjustment in China

Research Overview (50 words)

This study examines how policy-based admission classifications shape academic adjustment among affirmative action students in China. Drawing on qualitative interviews, it argues that institutional categories function as interpretive frames, influencing how students understand academic disparities and make educational decisions, even when underlying disadvantage is not socially visible.

Purpose

Affirmative action policies are widely implemented to expand access to higher education for disadvantaged populations. Existing research has generated substantial debate over their academic consequences, particularly through frameworks such as the “mismatch” hypothesis. However, this literature is largely grounded in contexts where the targeted difference—most notably race or ethnicity—is socially visible.

This study addresses a different empirical and theoretical setting: contexts in which disadvantage itself is not immediately observable, yet policy-based classification remains institutionally salient. Focusing on China’s targeted admission programs for students from rural and economically disadvantaged regions, the study investigates how affirmative action operates when “difference is invisible but policy is not.”

The central research question is: how do institutional admission classifications shape

students' interpretations of differences encountered in university life, and how do these interpretations influence their academic adjustment? By shifting attention from structural inputs (e.g., prior preparation) to interpretive processes, the study aims to reconceptualize how affirmative action affects post-admission experiences.

Methods

The study draws on qualitative semi-structured interviews with over 30 students admitted through China's special admission programs targeting rural and low-income populations. Participants were recruited from multiple universities of varying selectivity and across different academic disciplines, allowing for diversity in institutional and curricular contexts. Interviews focused on four core domains: (1) students' pathways into university and perceptions of their admission route, (2) experiences of academic and social adjustment, (3) interactions with peers and perceptions of difference, and (4) educational aspirations and decision-making processes.

Data were analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach. The analytical process involved iterative cycles of open coding, focused coding, and constant comparison between emerging categories and empirical material. MAXQDA software was used to facilitate systematic coding and data organization.

Results and Discussion

The findings identify a three-stage process through which institutional classification influences academic adjustment.

First, policy classification produces conditional visibility.

Although affirmative action status is not inherently visible in everyday interactions, it becomes partially observable through institutional procedures (e.g., scholarship applications, administrative processes) and peer inference. Many participants actively concealed their admission pathway due to concerns about being perceived as less capable, indicating that classification carries latent stigma even without overt disclosure.

Second, classification shapes interpretive frameworks.

Regardless of whether their status was publicly known, students consistently demonstrated a strong awareness of having entered university through a policy-based pathway. This awareness functioned as an interpretive lens when encountering differences in academic preparation, language proficiency, and familiarity with university norms.

Crucially, rather than attributing these disparities to structural inequalities in prior educational opportunities, many participants interpreted them as indicators of intrinsic ability differences. In other words, institutional classification contributed to the internalization of meritocratic explanations, reframing structural disadvantage as individual deficiency.

Third, these interpretations translate into self-limiting adjustment strategies.

Students' interpretive frameworks had tangible consequences for their academic behavior and decision-making. Many reported lowering academic aspirations, withdrawing from extracurricular engagement, and avoiding competitive opportunities such as graduate school recommendation pathways or international exchange programs.

These patterns suggest that affirmative action's effects are not confined to initial access or measurable academic performance, but extend to shaping students' self-evaluation and opportunity navigation over time. Institutional classification thus operates as a mechanism that structures not only perception but also action.

These findings highlight the importance of examining interpretive mechanisms through which affirmative action policies shape students' post-admission experiences, particularly in contexts where disadvantage is not socially visible but institutionally classified.

Further theoretical elaboration and empirical analysis of these mechanisms will be developed in the full presentation.