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Dilemmas and Coping Strategies for Urban Low-Income Groups' Access to Public Cultural Services (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study establishes a theoretical model of the dilemmas faced by urban low-income groups in accessing public cultural services, identifies the specific difficulties encountered in this process, and promotes population-wide equalization of public cultural service access. [Method/Process] Through field observations of the cultural living environments of urban low-income families, semi-structured interviews with 67 urban low-income individuals, and grounded theory methodology, this research investigates the dilemmas in public cultural service acquisition among urban low-income populations. [Results/Conclusion] Urban low-income groups are deeply entrenched in a dilemma characterized by dual internal and external pressures coupled with ineffective feedback mechanisms when accessing public cultural services. The underlying causes of this phenomenon are complex and deep-rooted, primarily encompassing four interacting core categories: individual cognitive limitations, objective condition pressures, service supply disparities, and ineffective feedback mechanisms. It is recommended that a multi-pronged approach be adopted, including strengthening material living foundations, breaking inherent mental constraints, optimizing resource allocation and supply, and reshaping awareness of subject rights and interests, to collectively ameliorate the access dilemmas faced by low-income groups in public cultural services.

Full Text

Preamble

Title: The Dilemma and Countermeasures of Urban Low-Income Groups in Accessing Public Cultural Services

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Abstract: [Purpose/Significance] This study establishes a theoretical model of the difficulties faced by urban low-income groups in accessing public cultural services, identifies the specific challenges they encounter, and promotes equal access to public cultural services across different populations. [Method/Process] Through field observations of the cultural living environments of urban low-income families and semi-structured interviews with 67 urban low-income individuals, this paper employs grounded theory to examine the dilemmas in accessing public cultural services. [Result/Conclusion] Urban low-income groups are deeply trapped in a predicament characterized by dual internal and external pressures and a failed feedback mechanism when accessing public cultural services. The causes of this phenomenon are complex and deep-seated, primarily encompassing four core categories: personal cognitive constraints, objective condition pressures, service supply differences, and feedback mechanism failure, which interact with one another. It is recommended to adopt a multi-pronged approach that strengthens material living foundations, breaks inherent mental shackles, optimizes resource allocation and supply, and reshapes awareness of individual rights to collectively improve the access dilemma for low-income groups.

Keywords: public cultural services; urban low-income groups; grounded theory

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1. Research Background

Significant disparities currently exist in China's public cultural services. Equalization, as a crucial means to bridge these gaps, has become a focal point for both policymakers and academics since the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, due to its core values of promoting fairness, justice, and coordinated resource allocation [1]. As early as 2015, the "Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of a Modern Public Cultural Service System" issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council explicitly identified "the elderly, minors, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, left-behind women and children in rural areas, and people living in difficulty" as priority targets for public cultural services [2]. With the deep integration of the cultural powerhouse strategy and targeted poverty alleviation work, the 18th CPC National Congress report further stated: "Adhere to a grassroots orientation and serving the people, accelerate the implementation of key cultural projects that benefit the people, and increase assistance to cultural development in rural and underdeveloped areas" [3].

However, as urban public cultural services become increasingly digital, intelligent, and personalized, disparities in access levels among different groups within

cities have become more pronounced. Due to economic hardship, low education levels, and lack of cultural atmosphere in daily life, urban low-income groups face numerous difficulties in accessing public cultural services. Safeguarding their basic cultural rights and promoting their equitable access to public cultural services constitute important tasks for advancing the equalization of public cultural services.

Existing domestic research on public cultural service access has yielded rich findings from various perspectives. The literature covers three main areas: First, supply-side optimization studies. Wu Zhinan argues that precise supply is a fundamental condition for meeting the growing demand for public cultural services, with the key being to focus on citizens' basic cultural needs, clarify the main work objectives, and leverage the core role of public culture in leading social trends [4]. Xiong Wenjing et al. introduce expectation-confirmation theory to construct an expectation-supply service model, thereby improving basic services and guarantees to enhance public satisfaction with access [5]. Sun Honglei et al. propose that public cultural institutions should actively participate in the "Healthy China" strategy, creating new supply and growth points for public cultural services and broadening new spaces for the overall development of cultural undertakings [6]. Liu Wei et al. suggest introducing big data technology to assist public cultural service supply, providing feasible solutions for problems such as supply-demand disconnect, low efficiency, and sustainability issues [7].

Second, supply-demand relationship studies. Chunyu Miaoling et al. examine the three-dimensional construction of public cultural service supply-demand relationships, optimizing the relationships among supply-demand subjects, value relationships, and docking relationships from a new public governance perspective to balance supply-demand relations and improve public satisfaction [8]. Chen Yijin et al. construct a user-centered public cultural service quality evaluation model, using confirmatory factor analysis and path analysis to explore four dimensions—tangibility, transparency, relevance, and suitability—providing important references for improving public cultural service access quality [9].

Third, studies on access difficulties among special groups, including rural populations, residents in impoverished areas, and persons with disabilities. Regarding rural populations, Chen Jian argues that rural public cultural services in China suffer not only from structural failures on the supply side but also from functional failures such as inefficient and ineffective policy systems and services [10]. Li Shaohui, studying Gannan Tibetan areas, finds that the absence of three main actors—farmers and herders, grassroots governments, and community organizations—leads to unmet cultural needs and access difficulties [11]. Li Guoxin proposes that China's public cultural services exhibit a clear hierarchical structure: the farther from urban centers, the weaker the services, and if not addressed promptly, farmers' access will become even more difficult [12].

Regarding residents in impoverished areas, Wang Yi et al. find that public cultural service construction in China's poor areas can be divided into five levels, with "unrated" and "unbalanced" areas facing problems such as backward

cultural infrastructure, scarce digital resources, and lack of targeted, in-depth cultural activities, resulting in low satisfaction and poor initiative [13]. Yan Xiaobin argues that access difficulties for poor area residents mainly reflect the lack of spatial justice in public cultural services, requiring the government to play a strategic role [14]. Duan Xiaohu et al. propose a matrix organizational structure project-based cultural poverty alleviation mechanism regarding the relationship between accessing public cultural services and improving economic living conditions [15].

Regarding persons with disabilities, Hu Yangling et al. reveal the difficulties this group faces in safeguarding their cultural rights, noting that the public cultural service system has not yet benefited the vast number of disadvantaged groups, leading to a lack of awareness and action in actively accessing public cultural services [16]. However, existing literature rarely focuses on low-income groups living in cities with relatively abundant cultural resources, despite being similarly disadvantaged populations.

Based on this background, investigating whether urban low-income groups can equally access public cultural services and whether they still face the threat of falling into cultural poverty traps holds significant practical importance. This study takes Tianshui City, Gansu Province as a case to examine the current situation of urban low-income groups' access to public cultural services, understand their dilemmas, summarize specific manifestations of their predicament, explore underlying causes, and propose improvement recommendations.

2. Research Design

2.1 Selection of Research Site

This study selected Tianshui City, Gansu Province as the research site for two reasons. First, according to the “Notice on Adjusting Urban Size Classification Standards” issued by the State Council in 2014 [17], cities with permanent populations exceeding 5 million can be classified as large cities. Under this standard, China has only 86 large cities, while the total number of cities at various levels reached 657 in 2019, meaning large cities account for only 13.08% of all cities [18]. Large cities typically have developed economies, comprehensive infrastructure, abundant resources, and relatively well-developed public cultural service systems. Therefore, surveys focusing on large cities cannot reflect the real cultural living conditions of most cities and urban residents.

Second, Tianshui City has 3 million permanent residents, with a GDP of 63.267 billion yuan and per capita disposable income of 28,707.5 yuan in 2019 [19]. Culturally, by the end of 2020, Tianshui had 24 cultural and artistic performance groups, 8 cultural centers, 113 township comprehensive cultural stations, 8 public libraries with 920,000 volumes, 6 public museums, 4 public art galleries, 3 public art centers, 1 youth cultural palace, broadcast and television coverage rates of 99.8% and 99.6% respectively, and 150,000 cable digital television subscribers [20]. Overall, Tianshui's economic and cultural development ranks at a

medium level in China's current social development, making it representative of small and medium-sized cities' social development and residents' cultural living standards.

China has not issued a unified official definition of "urban low-income groups." However, when a family's per capita annual income falls below a certain threshold (which varies by city), the family can apply for urban minimum living security benefits. Thus, urban minimum living security households can be considered officially recognized urban low-income groups. Tianshui's low-income household criterion is per capita monthly income below 589 yuan, which is unrealistically low in practice. Therefore, actual assessment primarily relies on factors such as family members with disabilities, chronic serious illnesses, drug addiction or gambling habits, criminal records, or elderly individuals living alone. This study selected Jubao Pen Community, Tianshui's earliest comprehensive urban residential community, for investigation. First, the 546 minimum living security households in the community were numbered and input into the "StatIX" online statistical assistance system on the Biostatistics Network for simple random sampling [21]. Thirty households were selected and visited individually with community workers' assistance. These 30 households had 85 members, of whom 67 agreed to be interviewed. Interviewed household details are shown in Table 1 .

2.2 Research Methods and Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations, analyzed using grounded theory. An interview outline was designed and pre-tested with 15 respondents from July 3-8, 2020. Based on pre-test results, the interview content was revised and finalized into four themes: (1) Personal cultural needs and access channels, including whether respondents understood their cultural needs, consciously satisfied them through reading or cultural activities, and their access channels. (2) Awareness of public cultural services, including understanding of what public cultural services are and their significance. (3) Degree of access to public cultural services, comprising three aspects: activity participation, facility utilization, and resource utilization, including knowledge and frequency of participation in public cultural activities, community facility conditions and usage, and access to public cultural resources. (4) Personal evaluation of public cultural services, including dissatisfaction and suggestions.

Subsequently, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted according to the outline. To authentically and comprehensively understand respondents' cultural living conditions, they could freely elaborate within the outline's guidance, answering according to their personal expression habits. The author recorded and organized responses, eliminating irrelevant parts, and completed household interviews on July 17, 2020.

3. Data Analysis and Model Construction

3.1 Data Analysis Process

3.1.1 Open Coding: Extracting Initial Concepts and Categories To adhere to coding principles faithful to original data, the author used original interview statements as initial concepts to derive categories. After eliminating substantive interview records and consolidating similar statements, coding ceased when no new categories emerged after reaching 61 initial concepts, indicating theoretical saturation. Ultimately, 29 representative categories reflecting low-income groups' public cultural service access status were obtained as the basis for further analysis, detailed in Table 2 .

3.1.2 Axial Coding: Extracting Main Categories By connecting the independent categories obtained from open coding, the author summarized and established potential internal logical chains among categories. According to their interrelationships and logical connections, 15 main categories were formed, detailed in Table 3 .

3.1.3 Selective Coding: Extracting Core Categories In the axial coding stage, when categories have fully demonstrated their interrelationships, connections gradually become apparent [22]. By analyzing and summarizing typical relational structures among main categories, four core categories were extracted, detailed in Table 4 .

3.2 Theoretical Model Construction

Based on field observations and interview data analysis from Tianshui's low-income groups, and considering the interactions among core categories, a grounded theory model of low-income groups' difficulties in accessing public cultural services was constructed (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]). The model comprises five components: constraining factors, subjective factors, objective factors, obstacles to low-income groups' public cultural service access, and final outcomes. Constraining factors and subjective factors are constituted by the core categories "feedback mechanism failure" and "personal cognitive constraints," respectively, while objective factors consist of "external condition pressure" and "service supply differences." The three influencing factors interact mutually: objective factors deepen subjective constraints, subjective constraints reinforce objective factors' influence, and combined with the absence of constraining factors, they collectively create multiple obstacles to low-income groups' public cultural service access, ultimately resulting in imbalanced access outcomes.

4. Research Findings

The analysis reveals that Tianshui's low-income groups face a grim situation in accessing public cultural services. The causes are complex and multi-layered,

primarily falling into the four core categories described below, which are illustrated with actual findings from the investigation.

4.1 Personal Cognitive Constraints

The most significant subjective factor affecting low-income groups' access is personal cognitive constraints, manifested in six aspects: weak cultural awareness, vague cultural needs, weak rights consciousness, self-deprecating psychology, service understanding bias, and digital service rejection. This category is both the main reason for the phenomenon of “able to access but unwilling to access” cultural services and an internal obstacle to normal access.

A primary cause of personal cognitive constraints is low education levels. Except for four middle school students and three college students, only one respondent had received higher education (college degree) (see Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]). Education level largely leads to vague awareness of cultural needs and cultural rights. A striking 91.6% of respondents viewed public cultural services as government rewards or charity rather than deserved social welfare and citizen rights. 85.3% could not accurately identify which needs were cultural or which activities were cultural, regarding reading, watching TV, and other culturally satisfying activities as merely time-passing or even time-wasting.

Cognitive limitations and long-term social disadvantage further foster a special “self-deprecating” psychology. 26.4% of respondents believed they “have neither money nor culture,” developing natural fear and avoidance of actively accessing public cultural services. Even when interested, they quickly self-reject, with seven respondents extremely believing they were unqualified to enter cultural venues. Weak rights consciousness also manifests in unfamiliarity with relevant laws. Despite recent legislation like the Public Cultural Service Guarantee Law and Public Library Law, 92.7% of respondents knew of no such laws.

Personal cognitive constraints also cause the extension of digital device rejection to public digital cultural services. Approximately 48.1% of respondents showed resistance to independently operating digital devices for online access, believing anything requiring internet operation was too difficult and undesirable. Even for digital cultural services not requiring computers, such as WeChat public accounts of libraries, museums, and cultural centers that regularly push cultural resources, not a single respondent followed them.

4.2 External Condition Pressure

Low-income groups face disadvantage in many practical aspects. Lack of cultural atmosphere, social reality pressure, objective condition constraints, and digital device deficiency create enormous external pressure for accessing public cultural services. Their weak economic power and low social status provide space for these pressures to grow, further suppressing equal access opportunities.

First, the lack of cultural atmosphere in daily life leads to disregard for public

cultural services. Due to special economic conditions, low-income groups' living and social circles are particularly closed, with friends mostly from similar backgrounds. Regarding daily entertainment, 43.8% of male respondents most frequently played mahjong, and 21.6% drank and chatted with friends. Among female respondents, 57.1% most frequently participated in square dancing (see Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]). 73.2% had never considered that visiting libraries or participating in cultural activities could be leisure options; 27.9% had never thought of actively visiting cultural venues; 62.7% preferred temple worship during traditional festivals over government-organized cultural activities, even when not religious.

Second, social secular pressure prevents some low-income groups from normally enjoying public cultural services. The first group is persons with disabilities, who feel their public presence attracts attention, especially in libraries and museums. Others' peculiar gazes create invisible pressure, preventing them from integrating into the cultural atmosphere and causing extremely poor experiences. The second group includes those with criminal records or 不良习惯 like drug addiction or gambling. Interviews revealed they are often specially treated when participating in large activities or visiting venues, frequently interrogated by police and deliberately avoided by activity organizers during interactive sessions, fostering resistance. These two stigmatized groups constitute a substantial proportion of low-income groups (see Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper]).

Third, objective condition constraints make equal participation difficult. While public cultural services are free, actual participation always incurs additional costs negligible for ordinary families but potentially unaffordable for low-income families. Few have stable jobs; many work as sanitation workers, temporary laborers, or scavengers for supplementary income. Such jobs lack fixed rest days, with daily wage settlement, so time spent at cultural venues obviously affects already meager earnings. 82.7% admitted having foregone cultural activities due to income concerns, and 37.9% cited income reduction as a reason for rarely visiting cultural venues.

Finally, lack of digital devices affects access to public digital cultural services. Among the 30 interviewed households, 22 had internet access, but only 7 had computers, which were seldom used, with remaining families having no plans to purchase computers.

4.3 Service Supply Differences

Uneven cultural resource distribution, inadequate infrastructure, and unfair activity participation opportunity allocation collectively create supply differences in public cultural services for low-income groups. As the "last mile" of public cultural services, community facilities provide the most accessible services and promote other venues and activities. The interviewed community is one of Tian-shui's earliest large-scale communities, with generally old buildings, many better-off families having moved out. Field observations revealed its public cultural

service facilities are much worse than newer communities: community bulletin boards have broken glass with content covered by advertisements, newspaper reading racks contain days-old papers, and the community library remains un-built. According to respondents, the municipal cultural center's outdoor movie trucks, museum community exhibitions, and library's door-to-door deposit-free library card services rarely benefit this community.

Additionally, limited traditional publicity methods create information reception differences. For example, Tianshui Library regularly invites renowned scholars for lectures, but 83.2% of respondents knew nothing about this. The museum and art gallery have been free to local ID holders since 2016, but 72.5% remain unaware, and 37.1% don't know their locations. While partly due to low-income groups' poor information access capabilities, the author argues against over-blaming them, as they focus more on livelihood information related to material life, naturally neglecting cultural services. Already disadvantaged by objective constraints, respondents also reported opaque, unfair opportunity allocation, such as designated participants in community cultural activities.

4.4 Feedback Mechanism Failure

As described above, respondents' experiences clearly reflect difficulties in accessing public cultural services. However, when asked for suggestions on attended activities or opinions on government-provided services, respondents were very tactful and evasive, fearing dissatisfaction might lead to cancellation of subsidies. Any suggestions focused solely on economic assistance. This reflects two problems: first, most low-income groups haven't realized that economic issues are only one cause of access difficulties, and simply increasing subsidies cannot fundamentally protect their cultural rights. Second, governments and communities have failed to provide safe, effective feedback platforms. The absence of feedback channels and weak feedback awareness interact, making access increasingly difficult.

5. Research Conclusions and Recommendations

In this context, improving low-income groups' access to public cultural services is bound to be challenging. The author proposes a chain-style improvement mechanism: strengthening material living foundations—breaking inherent mental shackles—optimizing resource allocation and supply—reshaping awareness of individual rights, to help low-income groups achieve equal access and protect basic cultural rights.

- (1) **Strengthen Material Living Foundations to Ensure Cultural Life Capacity.** According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, pursuing cultural needs presupposes guaranteed basic material needs. Therefore, ensuring low-income groups' basic material living standards is the fundamental condition for promoting equal access. Local governments should continuously adjust minimum living allowances according to regional economic devel-

opment, maintaining dynamic balance with local social development to liberate these groups from heavy life pressures. However, basic living allowances cannot directly lift them out of poverty; the fundamental solution is helping them find competent, stable employment. Governments can directly provide jobs, reserving low-skill, low-education public positions like urban sanitation, waste management, community services, and public facility maintenance for low-income groups. Alternatively, they can organize local enterprises to train unemployed local low-income individuals, with government subsidies or tax reductions for hiring them, addressing both enterprise labor shortages and creating employment. Low-income groups themselves must recognize work's importance—only when no longer worried about basic material needs can they have capacity to pursue cultural satisfaction.

- (2) **Break Inherent Mental Shackles and Foster Positive Social Cultural Atmosphere.** Interviews revealed that low-income groups' inherent thinking formed through long-term cultural deprivation constitutes a major endogenous obstacle. Cultural service institutions and communities should strengthen promotion to enhance their awareness, gradually fostering appreciation for cultural knowledge. Beyond conventional methods, use more direct approaches like SMS, phone calls, and home visits for targeted publicity. Whether these mental shackles can be broken also relates to the overall social cultural atmosphere. Respondents' experiences show existing social discrimination and prejudice against low-income groups, creating external resistance. Public cultural institutions and communities must implement equal access and non-discriminatory principles when organizing activities, actively integrate low-income groups, increase interaction, invite deep experiential participation, and model non-biased behavior for the public. Enriching cultural life can also inspire aspirations for better living, gradually fostering appreciation for culture, knowledge, and education, helping them overcome fear of and resignation to poverty, and enabling cultural life to 反哺 material life and mental outlook.
- (3) **Reduce Service Supply Differences and Rationally Plan Cultural Resource Allocation.** Though low-income groups depend more on public cultural services, they often live in communities with outdated or missing facilities and fewer resources. Beyond repairing facilities in low-income communities, rational planning to reduce supply differences is essential. First, enhance supply equalization by establishing cultural resource compensation mechanisms. For communities with high low-income populations, organize library, museum, and other cultural venue staff to conduct community-based lectures, speeches, reading competitions, and other small activities, showing care and building cohesion. Increase outdoor movie screenings with diverse cultural content like artistic performances, documentary exhibitions, and historical films. To boost attraction and participation, provide necessities like food and small household items as gifts. Second, identify needs to improve service precision. Before

building facilities or allocating resources, collect cultural needs information from low-income communities. When identifying needs, use simple, direct language and local dialects when communicating with elderly Mandarin speakers. Service precision requires providing culturally appropriate services matching their education levels, such as selecting accessible books for reading clubs and lectures.

- (4) **Establish Feedback Channels and Reshape Awareness of Individual Rights.** Only when low-income groups recognize their principal status and corresponding rights in public cultural services can they develop initiative in seeking and accessing cultural services. The “Migrant Workers’ Education and Capacity Improvement Action Plan” led by the Ministry of Education and coordinated by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions provides a good precedent. Local governments can collaborate with universities for batch-based continuing education to improve basic knowledge and skills. This strengthens rights awareness and helps them accurately recognize their cultural needs, becoming more proactive in access. Additionally, cultivate and guide low-income groups’ artistic interest teams for autonomous management and spontaneous activities as expression channels. Leverage annual community residents’ meetings to encourage expression and collect suggestions, forming a “demand-participation-feedback-improvement” correction chain. Regularly hold public cultural service hearings, needs collection meetings, and policy briefings with dedicated speaking opportunities for low-income groups to stimulate expression willingness.

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Author Contributions: Wanyan Dengdeng: Conceived the research topic, framework, structure, and methodology, and guided paper revision. Wang Zijian: Conducted field interviews, wrote the paper, designed charts, and revised the paper. Chen Xiaoting: Drew charts and revised the paper.

Abstract: [Purpose/significance] To establish a theoretical model of the plight of urban low-income people in accessing public cultural services, summarize the difficulties of urban low-income people in accessing public cultural services, and promote the equalization of public cultural services across populations. [Method/process] Through field observation of the cultural living environment of urban low-income families and semi-structured interviews with 67 urban low-income people, this paper uses grounded theory to study the dilemmas faced by urban low-income people in accessing public cultural services. [Result/conclusion] Urban low-income people are deeply trapped in the dilemma of internal and external dual pressures and feedback mechanism failure in accessing public cultural services. The reasons for this phenomenon are complex and deep-seated, mainly including four core categories: personal cognitive constraints, objective condition pressures, service supply differences, and feedback mechanism failure, which interact with each other. It is suggested that we should work together to improve the plight of low-income people's access to public cultural services by strengthening the material life foundation, breaking the shackles of inherent thinking, optimizing resource allocation and supply, and reshaping the awareness of the rights and interests of the main body.

Keywords: public cultural services; urban low-income group; grounded theory

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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