

Education

Physically Adults, but Psychologically Infants “Giant Babies” among Chinese College Students

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There has been widespread public concern in recent years about the phenomenon of “giant babies,” particularly among college students. Giant-baby college students are those who are physically grown-up but psychologically immature. The article focuses on analyzing their behavioral traits and the harm of their giant baby syndrome, with the aim of offering valuable insights into this social issue.

Keywords: Giant Babies; College Students; Psychological Development

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Introduction

GIANT babies, whose medical terminology is macrosomia, refer to those infants who weigh more than 4,000 grams at birth or weigh more than those in the 90th percentile in the same gestational age group (1). In recent years, “giant baby” has become a frequently cited term used to characterize adults who are physically well-developed but still retain infantile mentality and behaviors. From sociological perspectives, they are egocentric and selfish, unable to predict the potential impact their words and actions may have on others, thus causing complications and trouble for those around them. As per psychological theories, “giant babies” are adults who exhibit infantile psychological traits and hanker for carefree childhood times in an attempt to make up for their inner powerlessness and evade social responsibilities (2).

Conceptualization of the “Giant Baby”

Despite the fact that until very recently terms such as “giant baby,” “giant baby syndrome,” and “giant baby era” attracted heated discussions, psychological research on the man-child

phenomenon has had a long history.

The concept of “giant baby” can be traced back to the Austrian psychologist Alfred Adler’s discourse, which discussed an adult group that exhibited behavioral childishness and dependence while concurrently showing a strong sense of superiority and manipulation. They were referred to as “Big Babies” when their childishness was emphasized or as king or queen babies to underscore their self-absorption and self-importance (3). In 1966, the American psychiatrist Eric Berne defined the category of “adults with psychological maturation difficulty” (4). On the basis of numerous psychiatric diagnoses and treatment cases, Dr. Dan Kiley proposed the concept of “Peter Pan Syndrome” in 1983, dubbing those who “refuse to grow up and accept responsibility” “Peter Pans” (5). In 2000, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett developed the construct of “emerging adulthood” to conceptualize the phenomenon of 18-25-year-old youngsters “lingering over adolescence and delaying entering adulthood – a psychological state neither representing adolescence nor adulthood during the transition from teenage to early adulthood. Arnett argued that there always existed tension between the self

and society and resistance to being completely socialized in young people at this stage, which was possibly the most chaotic phase in their lives (6). Notwithstanding the varied focus of these theories, they all underscored that a sense of inferiority, immaturity, and inadequate independence and autonomy were prevalent among adults with infant-level psychological traits.

Popularization of the Construct of “Giant Baby” in China

The term “giant baby” became overwhelmingly popular in China after Zhihong Wu’s book *The Country of ‘Giant Babies’: A Domestic Psychologist Examining the Chinese National Character* was published in 2016 (7). The psychological consultant’s best-selling book instantaneously provoked widespread attention and debate. Subsequently, the term “giant baby” has propagated on websites, media, and even dictionaries as a buzzword. For instance, the journal Vocational Education issued the article titled *Are You A “Giant Baby” in the Workplace?* in 2017. In the same year, an article entitled *Why Do “Giant Babies” Stop Growing?* was published by Shenzhen Special Zone Daily. On January 10, 2018, the International Herald Leader issued a commentary on infantile behaviors among Chinese tourists, who ignored the embassy’s risk warnings but complained of the inadequate aid for emergencies on the part of the state (8).

In addition, there is a tendency for the connotation of “giant baby” to broaden in scope. Any individual with immature, irrational, egocentric, and dependent behaviors can be dubbed a giant baby (9). These childish dispositions are spreading among student groups, particularly college students. Even though the detriments of their infantile actions are not as severe as those of non-students’, the latent harm merits more attention and research.

Features of Giant-Baby College Students

Immature psychology in a physically well-developed adult is the primary feature of the giant-baby college student. Lacks of self-regulation, self-motivation in study, and planning for the future, as well as time and energy squandering, are prevalent among them. To be specific, they are reluctant to enter adulthood – overdependent on their family without capacities for independent thinking, self-reliance, and self-management; they are self-absorbed – unable to discern the boundary between the self and external environment or tolerate the differences of others; and they are bigoted – maintaining extreme views of the world and lacking social responsibility (10).

Narcissism and Egocentrism

Wu argued in his book that one of the main characteristics of a “giant infant” is narcissism, a mentality that “I am the omnipotent god, and the world should run according to my will; otherwise, I will become a fierce and devastating devil, wishing to destroy the world or myself (7, p.170). Narcissistic giant-baby college students believe that they are the center of the world and that everything in the world should be in line with their personal needs. Egocentricity is a common feature among them. They are so self-centered that they never consider the possible impact of their behaviors on others and are blind to the needs of others (11). In social intercourse, they take others’ giving and helping

for granted but can neither truly love nor enjoy being loved.

Overdependence on the Family of Origin

The only-child generation has attracted a plethora of criticism for their lack of self-reliance and overdependence on parents. Due to the implementation of the family planning policy, the majority of college students born in the late 1990s or early 21st century are their parents’ only children. A significant portion of them have become used to being taken care of for everything since childhood. Their childish predispositions are partially due to overprotection from family members: they accept family’s planning of and interference in their lives and often allow parents and other family members to make decisions for them on a variety of matters ranging from basic needs to education, relationships, and career choices (12).

Nevertheless, the issue of lack of self-reliance among young people not only exists in China but has also become a worldwide trend. According to a research report from the U.S.’s Pew Research Center, approximately one third of young adults lived in their parents’ homes in 2015 (13). A French report released in December 2015 showed there were 45,027 adults living in the homes of their parents, grandparents, or friends (14). Without a doubt, the issue is more severe in China. Relevant data in 2020 revealed that 30% of Chinese young adults lived off their parents and that more than 60% of Chinese parents must financially support their adult children to varying degrees (15).

Difficulty with Discerning the Boundaries between the Self and the External World

Self-knowledge plays a crucial role in the mental development of individuals, significantly impacting the formation and development of their character. Nonetheless, there is a dearth of self-knowledge among giant-baby college students, which makes their behavior naive and bigoted in social encounters (16). Familial overprotection deprives them of attempts at independent decision-making and chances of communication with non-family members, especially peers. As a result, their understanding of people and things is superficial, rendering it difficult for them to distinguish between the personal and external worlds or to form connections with others on an equal level. In the meantime, parental leniency fosters their omnipotent mindset to the extent that they become intolerant of the behavioral differences between themselves and others. They do not have the capacity to place themselves in the position of others when disputes arise, but instead demand that the conflicting party unconditionally accept their feelings and assertions as their parents do. Otherwise, they will break down or develop psychopathologies (11).

In the school setting, giant-baby college students extend their habitual dependence to classmates. They cannot take responsibility for their own performance at school but rather depend on their classmates to complete academic work, particularly group work that necessitates joint input. At the same time, they tend to make unreasonable claims about work outcomes. In the instance of their intention being defied, they will choose to evade their responsibilities. Over time, they lose the ability to manage their college lives properly (17).

Lack of Proper Understanding of the Individual-Society Relationship

Humans are social creatures by nature. Individual wellbeing is inextricably connected with societal conditions. Growing up in a greenhouse-like home setting, giant-baby college students have long been indulged in an imaginary world, unable to make the distinction between reality and their imagined scenarios. There are two extremes in their approach to the individual-society relationship. At one extreme, they can be so self-conceited as to groundlessly assume that they can easily make an enormous difference to society; at the other extreme, they put their personal interests on top of everything else, exhibiting overwhelming egoism while disregarding social responsibility in any form (18).

In addition, unreasonably high parental education expectations, excessive parental involvement, unscientific school education, and the negative images imposed on the only-child generation by society intensify the defiant attitude of today's youngsters. They tend to reject whatever is advocated by the nation and what is expected of them by their parents (19).

Detrimental Effects of Giant-Baby Syndrome in College Students

College students are in the process of developing professional expertise to prepare themselves for their future social positions. They are expected to become a pivotal social force for the future of society. However, incidents such as “a 23-year-old ‘giant baby’ starving to death at home,” “a university student being caught cheating in the exam and killing himself by falling from the teaching building,” “a university student suing their fathers for tuition fees,” and “an overseas student abusing their father because of insufficient allowances” are warning society of the negative impact of the giant baby mentality on young college students (20). The emergence of giant-baby college students indicates unsuccessful family education and substantial losses for the nation and society.

Stunting Personal Development

Egocentrism in giant-baby college students can lead to multiple problems with their social interactions, causing complications in establishing healthy social connections and eventually resulting in a narrowed social scope and impaired quality of social life. Overdependence on parents and peers compromises their autonomy while increasing their avoidance behaviors. Frequent class skipping, course failure, and course repetition in their college years greatly diminish their knowledge and skill repertoire.

They may end up with mediocre academic performance or give up on themselves.

Impairing Family Functioning

The family plays a crucial role in child socialization. The majority of Chinese parents place a high value on child education; at the same time, it may possibly become a heavy burden on children. They make every effort to provide children with high-quality living conditions and the best education within their reach. Yet, training on social norms and skills is likely to be neglected in their family lives. As a result, children tend to take their family's devotion for granted and develop indifference to all matters irrelevant to their academic affairs. College students raised under this parenting style have inadequate abilities in emotional control, self-regulation, self-care, and responsibility assumption, which inevitably lead to parent-child tensions (21). Recent years' Report on Social Problems with Chinese One-Child Families underlines that mental health issues have become a primary impediment to the future development of children without siblings (22).

Hindering Social Development

To meet the needs of social development, college students are expected to develop a consciousness of responsibility for the nation and society and continuously increase their competencies by fulfilling their responsibilities. The state has invested substantial human and financial resources in higher education to cultivate mature talents for the nation's development. Nevertheless, giant-baby college students have difficulty integrating into the community, let alone contributing to society. Their existence has disrupted the normal functioning of society; it also poses a negative impact on people's confidence in the future success of society.

Conclusion

The acceleration of social and technological development poses enormous pressure on contemporary college students. Factors such as the rise of Internet culture, unreasonable education that places one-sided emphasis on intellectual capability, improper parenting style, and personality traits of individuals can all contribute to the delay of psychological growth in youngsters. More research is necessitated to investigate the psychological development patterns corresponding to various growth stages in order to provide parents and educators with pertinent guidelines for fostering healthy personalities in youth. ■

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