

College Graduates' Negative Life Experiences, Coping Strategies and Enlightenment During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study in China

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Objective: The current study aimed to explore comprehensively college graduates' negative life experiences, coping strategies, and enlightenment in a qualitative way.

Methods: This was a qualitative study. Purposeful sampling was used to select 31 college graduates majoring in various subjects from a Chinese University. The one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted online through Tencent QQ/WeChat and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A phenomenological approach was used to guide this research in the data collection and analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes across interviews around their negative life experiences, coping strategies, and enlightenment.

Results: College graduates' negative life experiences were mainly focused on three aspects: negative work experience (eg, lack of adaptation, busy schedule, low salary), negative personal life experience (eg, multiple pressure, psychological problems, the hardship of life), and negative social life experience (eg, the incomprehension of those around you, complex interpersonal relationship, social complexity). The coping strategies they used can be classified into two categories: emotion-focused strategies (eg, accepting reality, self-persuasion, keeping a positive attitude), and problem-focused strategies (eg, goal-setting, asking for help to solve the problem, persistence). As for life enlightenment, six themes emerged: accept life, strive to life, love life, cherish life, recognize life, and learn to live.

Conclusion: College graduates' negative experiences came from multiple levels, and they use multiple coping strategies to deal with the challenges. Our results provide important guidance for researchers and policymakers to design effective and targeted intervention programs to improve college graduates' coping abilities in response to negative life experiences and help them better transition from school to work. Specifically, future research and intervention to promote college graduates' mental health should target various social-ecological levels, focus on promoting coping from an ecological perspective, as well as facilitate post-traumatic growth to help them grow from negative life experiences and cope positively.

Keywords: college graduates, negative life experiences, coping, enlightenment, qualitative research, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

The worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 is threatening the world population, leading to financial hardship, social isolation, and psychological distress,¹⁻⁴ and has negatively affected the mental health of various population groups.⁵ In countries that have experienced major outbreaks such as China and the US, increased rates of mental health problems have been frequently reported, especially among young people compared to any other age group⁶ such as college graduates.⁷⁻⁹ As the continuing COVID-19 crisis engulfs the global population and brings about enormous challenges to their life, it stands to disproportionately impact the invisible workforce of college graduates.¹⁰ College graduates are in

a critical transition stage where they start to leave the ivory tower of academia, enter the competitive job market, and build their own families. However, the unprecedented economic downturn,¹⁰ the large-scale shutdown of schools, and the closure of companies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have caused rampant hiring freezes among college graduates.¹¹ Compared to the general population, college graduates are faced with multiple life challenges and stressful conditions including the pressure of job competition, lack of general support, the uncertainty of the future,¹² limited life experiences, and lack of coping abilities, which makes them especially vulnerable to negative life experiences and related psychological problems.¹³

Abundant empirical evidence has linked negative life experiences to both physical and mental problems, such as weak immunity, stress, and depression.^{14,15} For instance, childhood adversities have been reported to account for 29.8% of all mental disorders across the life course in epidemiological surveys in 21 countries in the World Health Organization (WHO) World Mental Health (WMH) Survey Initiative.¹⁶ Another national longitudinal study of adolescent health has reported that childhood/adolescent socioeconomic adversities and stressful life transition events were uniquely associated with elevated levels of cardio-metabolic (CM) biomarkers and predicted cumulative CM disease risk in young adulthood.¹⁷ In addition, negative life experiences have also been shown to be associated with poorer adjustment and lower psychological resilience.¹⁸ People in the youth are especially vulnerable to negative life experiences and related psychosocial problems, with studies showing that the young age group of 18–25 years experienced the most psychological distress.¹⁹ The World Health Organization has identified youth between 15 and 24 years old to be a high-risk group prone to suicidal ideation and subsequent suicidal behaviors and/or attempts.²⁰ As the major cause of death among Chinese youth, suicide ranked second in the 15 to 19 years old group and first in the 20 to 24 years old group.²¹

Managing challenges in life relies on the individual's ability to cope.²² Coping is an involuntary mental and behavioral reaction by individuals to save themselves from anxiety-provoking emotions²³ or the process of implementing a response to a stressful situation.²⁴ Coping strategies are to compensate for or improve stressful situations by either the reformulation of objectives or the adjustment to a new and positively assessed situation.²⁵ Existing research on the classification of coping strategies has a lot of different typologies, but the most influential typology²⁶ is the one developed by Lazarus and Folkman²⁷ and Nicchi and Le Scanff,²⁸ which classified coping into two major types: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is aimed at “managing or altering the problem causing the distress” and emotion-focused coping is aimed at “regulating emotional responses to the problem”.²⁷ People rarely rely on a single coping style, they may use multiple coping styles,²⁹ but not all coping strategies are successful, helpful, health-promoting,³⁰ or advantageous.³¹ People may adopt a positive-engaged or negative-engaged coping strategy according to the availability of resources used to deal with a stressor.³² Psychological resources crucially influence how people appraise life challenges, how they deal with them, and how they integrate them into their life stories as time goes on.³³ In the face of adversity, some individuals may display a profile of resilience, use effective coping strategies or be able to navigate toward supportive resources to deal with difficult times and maintain a positive adaptation.³⁴ Resiliently-minded people seem to have a better ability to view and engage with their environment more positively, and this enables them to adapt to adverse situations better.⁴ People who can cope positively through a series of behavioral and cognitive tactics and actions can deal with challenging demands, situations,³⁵ and environmental stressors.³⁶ While some people who use more frequent negative coping strategies such as self-blame have higher depressive symptoms,³⁷ using other negative coping strategies such as smoking and drinking is detrimental to health.^{38,39}

Although negative life experiences and coping strategies have been widely reported to affect health outcomes among the general population, less is known about college graduates who are faced with multiple life challenges and are especially vulnerable to negative life experiences. College graduates are the major workforce in the labor market and are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis. They are faced with a variety of life challenges as they transition from school to work, yet they lack life experiences, coping, and social resources, which may negatively affect their mental health and lead to mental and social problems. It is thus important to understand college graduates' negative life experiences and how they deal with them in order to guide future targeted intervention programs to improve the general well-being of college graduates. In addition, the majority bulk of previous studies on negative life experiences and coping strategies have been quantitative, and there is a lack of in-depth qualitative studies to provide a profound insight into college graduates' negative life experiences and coping strategies, which is essential for future intervention programs to

improve their well-being. In light of such research gaps, we conducted the current qualitative study to explore college graduates' negative life experiences and inquire about the coping strategies they used to overcome or adapt to these challenges. In addition, we further asked about whether and what life enlightenment they gave got from these negative life experiences.

Participants and Methodology

Study Design and Participants

The investigation was initiated by the Department of Health Management and the Center for Mental Health Research. A descriptive phenomenological design was preferred and guided this study because the study aimed to reveal the life experiences of college graduates. A phenomenological approach is described by Moustakas as a form of investigation that seeks to shed light on human experiences by exploring phenomena and how it is experienced and perceived by a person or group.⁴⁰ Purposive sampling was used to select participants to ensure maximum variation (by gender, characteristic of graduate school, and major) and to get a diversified sample. Inclusion criteria were as follows: 1) have graduated from a Chinese university with a degree, 2) have graduated for one year prior to the research.

Data Collection and Interview Process

All participants were recruited and interviewed online through Tencent QQ/WeChat, the two largest social media platforms in China. One-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to enable reciprocity between interviewers and participants⁴¹ via Tencent QQ/WeChat. Participants can choose the time and place for their interviews at their own convenience without presence of other non-participants to ensure the privacy of the interviews. The first draft of the interview guide was developed based on a literature review and in-depth pilot interviews with four college graduates with the same inclusion criteria of the study. The aim of these pilot interviews was to explore ideas and develop hypotheses about college graduates' perceptions of and experiences with negative life experiences and their ways of coping to prepare for the main data collection process. These pilot interviews allowed for the identification of the main negative life events and coping strategies adopted by college graduates. The final individual interview guide, based on the results of the pilot interviews, was slightly modified during the interview process, as allowed by qualitative research methodologies. Data obtained from the pilot interviews were not included in the research data.

The interview guide comprised two sections: introduction and interview. In the introduction and warm-up section, participants were asked: "In general, how do you feel about yourself after graduation?" The semi-structured interview comprised the following questions: 1. "Do you mind talking about your negative life experiences during the year after graduation?" 2. "Do you mind talking about how you coped with the negative life experiences?" and 3. "Do you mind talking about your enlightenment for life?". The interviews were performed by the lead investigator (L.Z.) who is a female associate professor in the Department of Health Management of Management School at a University. With a Ph.D. in public health, the lead investigator has been teaching and researching public health for college students for over 10 years. The lead investigator has high expertise and rich experience in qualitative research and public health. The lead investigator established a mutual understanding relationship with the participants by sharing her personal goals, life experiences, and reasons for doing this research so that the participants had better knowledge of the investigator. The investigator also explained the aim and procedure of the study to each participant so that the participants had a better understanding of the research. Before an interview began, the interested participant was asked to sign an informed consent for both the interview and audio taping. The informed consent stated that the data collected will remain confidential and anonymous responses will be published. Confidentiality was assured by replacing names with numbers and removing any identifying information from the transcripts. All audio recordings, transcripts, and participants' data were saved on password-protected computers. Furthermore, participants were allowed to withdraw at any time. At the conclusion of the interviews, the participants were rewarded with 30 RMB as compensation for their participation and contribution to the research. All interviews were audio-recorded, and the interviewer made field notes as necessary during and after the interviews. Data collection was terminated after the 31st interview when the data reached the saturation point, that is, when no new information emerged, or when the answers were found to be repetitive. Three

college graduates refused or dropped out due to sudden illness, lack of time, and lack of interest. Demographic information about the participants was asked after a semi-structured interview. The mean interview duration was 48 min (min-max: 37–62 min). All transcripts were returned to participants for comment and/or correction. Before we coded the interviews and in keeping with COREQ protocol, we discussed our biases regarding the characteristics of the interviewer and the population of our study and how this might both enhance and bias our understanding of the study given the interviewer's unique life experiences.

Data Analysis

The study data were transcribed verbatim, interview transcripts were imported into the computer software NVivo 12 for coding and analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify themes across interviews.⁴² The thematic analysis contains three steps: immersion in the topic, identification of possible themes, and reviewing of themes.⁴³ Using a sample of interview transcripts, research team members independently identified initial themes and developed code-book drafts. To guarantee data reliability, experienced investigators with a good master of reviewing techniques conducted data analysis. To validate the results, two investigators (L.Z. and Y.C.) analyzed the obtained data separately and discussed their findings, disagreements in the interpretation of the findings were resolved through discussion and by making constant reference to the transcripts. We also invited the participants to provide feedback on the findings. The guideline of consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) was used for providing this manuscript.⁴⁴

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Zunyi Medical University (Approval No: (2022) 4–002). Participant informed consent was obtained before enrolment in this study. The research was conducted in accordance with the approved protocol and the Declaration of Helsinki, so confidentiality and anonymity of data are maintained.

Results

Background Characteristics of Participants and Main Findings

The study included 31 participants, 15 males and 16 females. Their average age was 24 years (min-max: 23–25 years). Twenty-four participants (77%) were currently employed. Professional classification involves a variety of disciplines. Seven participants (23%) graduated from a key school, others 24 participants (77%) graduated from normal school (Table 1). Our analysis of the qualitative, interview data revealed the themes, subthemes (Table 2) and representative quotes from participants' statements of "negative life experiences", "coping with negative life experiences" and "life enlightenment" (Supplementary Materials Tables (S1–S3)).

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N =31)

| Variable | N (%) | Variable | N (%) |
|-----------------------|----------|-------------------------------------|----------|
| Age (y) | | The classification of major | |
| 23 | 9 (29%) | Medicine | 4 (13%) |
| 24 | 12 (39%) | Law | 2 (6%) |
| 25 | 10 (32%) | Education | 3 (10%) |
| Gender | | Economics | 3 (10%) |
| Male | 15 (48%) | Engineering Technology | 8 (26%) |
| Female | 16 (52%) | Management | 9 (29%) |
| Whether to have a job | | Sociology | 2 (6%) |
| Yes | 24 (77%) | Characteristic of graduation school | |
| No | 7 (23%) | Key school | 7 (23%) |
| | | Normal school | 24 (77%) |

Table 2 The Themes and Subthemes Identified

| | Themes | Subthemes |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Negative life experience | Negative work experience | Lack of adaptation to work Failing the exam Busy work Confusion and loss at work Low salary The instability of work Work takes over my life |
| | Negative personal life experience | Multiple pressure Psychological problems The hardship of life The weariness of life Dissatisfaction with myself Boredom of life Loneliness |
| | Negative social life experience | The incomprehension of those around you Complex interpersonal relationship Receiving negative energy from other people Social complexity Difficulty in social integration |
| Coping strategies | Emotion-focused coping strategies | Accept the reality Keep a positive attitude Change perspective Talk to someone Self-persuasion Compromise and escape Do what I like |
| | Problem-focused coping strategies | Persistence Goal-setting Ask for help to solve the problem |
| Enlightenment | Accept life | |
| | Strive for life | |
| | Love life | |
| | Cherish life | |
| | Recognize life | The difference between society and school A gap between ideal and reality Difficulty to find a satisfactory job Fierce competition in the job market Pain and happiness |
| | Learn to live | Learn to social Learn to learn Learn to adapt to society Learn to improve yourself Learn to regulate your emotions Learn to be independent Learn to keep healthy |

Negative Life Experience

Three themes and 19 subthemes were identified around college graduates' negative life experiences: negative work experience (including 7 sub-themes: lack of adaptation to work, failing the exam, busy work, confusion and loss at work, low salary, the instability of work, and work takes over my life), negative personal life experience (including 7 sub-themes: multiple pressure, psychological problems, the hardship of life, the weariness of life, dissatisfaction with myself, boredom of life, and loneliness), and negative social life experience (including 5 sub-themes: the incomprehension of those around you, complex interpersonal relationship, negative energy from people around you, social complexity, and difficulty in social integration).

Negative Work Experience

A common aspect of negative work experience was lack of adaptation to work, which was mentioned by 9 participants. College graduates who entered the workplace for the first time may have a hard time adapting to the new working environment and are confronted with multiple challenges such as work intensity, work pressure, workplace culture, and interpersonal relationship.

My work experience is very limited, and I need to grow from a student who knows nothing to a qualified worker, during this time I need to learn a lot, and the job requires me to adapt to it in a very short period of time. (P27)

What I find most difficult to adapt to may be the workplace culture, such as how to get along with colleagues in the company, what I need to pay attention to and how to deal with leaders. (P7)

Another commonly mentioned aspect of negative work experience was failing the exam during the job-seeking process, which may negatively affect the participants' self-confidence and belief in their work choice.

A poor score in an exam will lead to emotional instability and fragile heart. (P25)

...I have experienced failure by a few points many times, I will doubt whether my choice is worth sticking to. (P22)

Participants also mentioned they were overwhelmed by a busy work schedule, making them hard to rest and relax. Some participants complained about having to work overtime and take on multiple duties almost at the same time.

...I may come back at 3 or 4 am, and then I have to go on a business trip to court at 9:30 the next morning. (P3)

In addition, participants revealed confusion and loss at work as common aspects of negative work experiences. As newcomers at work, college graduates sometimes feel unwelcomed by colleagues and unable to fit in the workplace.

...I felt that the staff were not interested in me, and I felt that the department no longer needed me. (P17)

Other negative work experiences mentioned by the participants included low salaries, work instability, and work taking over life. Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with their salaries, which made them feel less valued and doubted their abilities.

It's the low salary in my present job that makes me doubt myself. (P15)

One participant complained about the instability of work that was not in line with his expectations and made him feel disappointed.

What I am not satisfied with is that I have not found a stable job, which is different from what I expected. (P17)

Another participant complained that work took so much of his time that he did not even have time to enjoy his personal life.

Work takes up most of my life. Then, when I am working, I will have a feeling that my life is gone, and I can barely spend time with my family and friends. (P27).

Negative Personal Life Experience

During the transition from college students to new employees, participants are confronted with various kinds of life pressure, including economic pressure (n=17), work pressure (n=10), exam pressure (n=8), peer pressure (n=7), employment pressure (n=6), choice pressure (n=4), and family pressure (n=2). Economic pressure was frequently mentioned as a common life stressor by many participants. The economy is the foundation of personal and family life and is of great importance to all of us, but some of the respondents did not find a job or had a low salary, so economic pressure became their main life stressor.

... I always want to have a stable economic income to support my family, but the truth is that after graduation, I still need support from my family. (P23)

...1300 Yuan a month, so I keep overdrawing on rent and living, which leads to more and more debt. (P7)

Work pressure is another major life stressor mentioned by the participants. For college graduates who are new to their jobs, work can be very demanding and challenging, leading to lots of pressure.

I have a lot of work to do every day, and often this one isn't done yet, and there are several other deadlines that need to be done. (P24)

If you make a mistake at school, you can correct it, but if you make a mistake at work, you will not only correct it, but you will also be punished. (P26)

Exam pressure is also common among college graduates.

I was worried that my family would be criticized by my relatives. (P10)

The influence of external and internal factors makes it very stressful to prepare for the exam. (P25)

Peer pressure arises when participants see their peers succeed and themselves fail.

Many of my friends had their own jobs and lives. I experienced failure again and again. (P28)

I always unconsciously compared myself with other classmates in the same period, and I found that I was inferior to others in almost everything. (P23)

Employment pressure is high due to the economic shutdown and hiring freeze under the coronavirus pandemic.

...many people want to have a stable job during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in increasingly fierce competition for these positions. (P25)

College graduates have to make many life decisions among various choices, which may lead to choice pressure.

My stress is reflected in some choices at the fork in the road. (P7)

In addition, participants also have to take on family responsibilities such as taking care of old parents, which may bring about family pressure.

As my parents are getting old, I have more and more responsibilities to take on. (P25)

Psychological problems are also commonly reported as negative personal life experiences by the participants. Participants expressed emotional distress during the job-seeking process due to concerns about not getting the job.

Before I found a job, I was very anxious at home. (P13)

However, even after they got the jobs, they still are challenged by heavy workloads and concerns of not finishing the work in time, which also cause emotional distress.

After I start my work, the daily workload is very heavy, and there is not enough time to finish, so I am very stressed out. (P6)

In addition, participants also tasted the hardship, weariness, boredom, and loneliness of life, which all represented negative personal life experiences. Some participants found it hard to transition from school to work and have realized the hardship of life after experiencing setbacks.

...I experienced all kinds of pressure, blows, and rejection everywhere. I lived two completely different lives, from carefree school life to cruel social life. (P26)

Some participants were exhausted by too much work.

I often work beyond working hours without extra pay, long hours of overtime and various kinds of work pressure will put a person in a state of exhaustion. (P8)

Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with themselves after comparison with others.

Some of my close friends have gone to school, while I stay at home, I feel sad, and have been living in regret. (P11)

Some participants expressed boredom with life and loss of hope.

My life experience in this year after graduation is rather boring, and I feel that I have no motivation. (P6)

One participant also reported loneliness as a negative personal life experience.

...I felt a little lonely. People around me were studying and working. (P24)

Negative Social Life Experiences

The theme of “social life experience” consists of five sub-themes: the incomprehension of those around you (n=8), complex interpersonal relationships (n=6), negative energy from people around you (n=3), social complexity (n=1), and difficulty in social integration (n=1).

Lack of understanding from family, relatives, or friends has been frequently mentioned as a common aspect of negative social life experiences. Participants expressed frustration over other people’s misunderstanding of their preparation for the work entrance exam.

When I was at home preparing for exams, some friends and relatives who didn’t understand me would say a lot of very sensitive words, which made me feel very sad and uncomfortable. (P10)

As college graduates transition from school to work, their social networks also change from teachers and classmates to leaders and colleagues. Participants mentioned the complex interpersonal relationship at work has put them in a difficult position.

At school, the relationship with teachers and classmates was completely different from that with leaders and colleagues. I was not good at dealing with interpersonal relationships at work. (P22)

In addition, participants mentioned receiving negative energy from other people as part of their negative social life experience, which may negatively affect their own emotional health.

Some people were pessimistic and pass that negativity to me, which sometimes makes me struggle with right and wrong for a few days. (P12)

One participant also reported feeling social complexity.

One thing I realize after I enter the society is that campus life is really beautiful and simple, and the society is really complicated. (P16)

Another participant reported having difficulty in social integration.

I didn’t fit in my job or the social circles of my colleagues, which led to my negative experience. (P17)

Coping with Negative Life Experiences

When asked about how to cope with negative life experiences, participants listed a wide range of strategies they utilized, which can be classified into emotion-focused coping strategies including 7 sub-themes and problem-focused coping strategies including 3 sub-themes.

Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies

Seven sub-themes emerged under the theme of “emotion-focused coping strategies”: accept reality (n=10), talk to someone (n=8), self-persuasion (n=8), do what I like (n=5), keep a positive attitude (n=4), change perspective (n=3), and compromise and escape (n=1).

Participants frequently mentioned when they were faced with negative life experiences, they would try to accept the reality to cope with the emotional distress brought about by these negative experiences.

My main coping style is to do more, think less, get on with the present, and compare less. (P13)

By realizing and accepting reality, participants may be motivated to work harder to improve themselves.

The exam results are not ideal, which means I am not working hard enough, so I must study hard. (P5)

Participants mentioned “talking to someone” as a common emotion-focused coping strategy they used to deal with negative life experiences. By sharing their negative experiences, participants find support and encouragement from others, especially when they have similar experiences.

I will communicate with like-minded and positive friends, talk about life principles and plans, learn and encourage each other. (P13)

Self-persuasion was another effective emotion-focused coping style participants used to deal with negative life experiences. By persuading themselves to accept the negative experiences, participants learn to look at these experiences from a more positive perspective to cope with negative emotions.

Every time I feel more negative emotions, I will self-channel and think more deeply to interpret the negative experiences beyond the phenomenon and see the essence. (P24)

Self-persuasion also helps participants to take positive actions to achieve success.

As long as I study harder, build self-confidence, learn from every failure, I will succeed. (P22)

Participants stated when they were confronted with negative life experiences, they would also try to do things they like to distract themselves from those upsetting things. Some mentioned sports and exercise as good ways to relieve stress from negative experiences. “Do what I like”, “enjoy nature”, “tidy the room”, and “have a nice dinner” are also some coping styles they choose.

I am an amateur badminton player, sports bring me a lot of pleasure, after a lot of sweat, I feel relieved from life pressure. (P8)

Some mentioned enjoying nature to get away from negative experiences and emotions.

I will empty myself to nature, even when I am busy, I will take time to go, enjoy the feeling of being surrounded by green, I don't have to think about anything, I can let my mood calm down and think well. (P27)

One participant mentioned doing housework helped him cope with negative experiences.

I will clean my room and put everything in order. (P27)

Another participant mentioned eating a nice meal as an effective coping style.

Choose a gourmet meal such as a delicious dinner. (P27)

Keeping a positive attitude in the face of difficulties was frequently mentioned by the participants as an effective emotion-focused coping style. Participants who hold positive attitudes are always able to see good things out of bad experiences and turn something negative into positive.

I am resilient to negative life experience. I will treat the negative experience as inspiration, and turn negative life experience into a positive experience. (P31)

Changing perspective is another effective coping style they chose to cope with negative life experiences, especially those related to interpersonal relationships. Participants may gain a better understanding of what other people are thinking when they put themselves in other people's shoes, which is effective in solving disputes and conflicts.

When conflicts occurred, I slowly think back, in fact, nothing happened, as long as I stand in the perspective of others to think, and I show a good attitude, the conflicts can be basically solved. (P5)

One participant mentioned using compromise or escape to deal with negative life experiences, which may not be effective in solving the problems and may lead to more emotional distress.

The ultimate solution to a job search is to compromise. When I can't face family issues, I try to escape first. Now I really can't face it. (P12)

Problem-Focused Coping Strategies

Three sub-themes emerged under the theme of "problem-focused coping strategies": goal-setting (n=5), persistence (n=5), and asking for help to solve the problem (n=3).

Setting goals and working towards them were also effective ways of coping with negative life experiences. By setting up goals and making specific plans, participants have a clearer overview of their life and take more active actions to realize their goals.

I set a long-term plan and I'm working towards that. (P31)

I will give myself a psychological hint, I must believe in myself that I will achieve the goals I set. (P10)

Persistence was also an important and useful problem-focused coping style participants took in response to negative life experiences. According to the participants, persistence means strong willpower to hold on to life goals, to never give up no matter what kind of challenges and difficulties they are faced with.

...I can only grit my teeth to stick to it, it is not easy to find a job in the current job market, what I can do is to stick. (P30)

In addition, participants would also ask for help to solve the problem from friends or families when they were confronted with negative life experiences. Suggestions and advice from others may help them better solve the problems they encounter.

...I will find friends who are better than me to get some solutions. I will try to overcome my own shortcomings and learn from others so that I can prepare for my next exam with better performance. (P25)

Life Enlightenment

Six themes emerged in participants' life enlightenment: accept life (n=11), strive for life (n=8), love life (n=6), cherish life (n=4), recognize life (including 5 sub-themes: the difference between society and school, a gap between ideal and reality, difficulty to find a satisfactory job, fierce competition in the job market, pain and happiness), and learn to live (including 7 sub-themes: learn to social (n=5), learn to learn (n=3), learn to adapt to society (n=3), learn to improve yourself (n=3), learn to regulate your emotions (n=1), learn to be independent (n=1), learn to keep healthy (n=1)).

Accept Life

Accepting life was perceived by some participants as an important aspect of life enlightenment. According to the participants, we have to accept life whether it is good or bad because life goes on.

This year, although my life is not so ideal, nor is it so exquisite, in general, I feel OK, at least I did not let myself go hungry, when I look at those uncles and aunts in their thirties and forties who are crowded in the bus every day, I feel good when compared with them. (P5)

A simple summary is to learn to grow up in the bump and bump and constantly understand the meaning of life in the accumulation. No matter good or bad, it is what we should experience. Every step of the road counts. (P7)

Strive for Life

Striving for life was also an important aspect of life enlightenment and was helpful in the pursuit of a better life, especially in the current job market filled with fierce competition.

The biggest enlightenment from the life of the year after graduation is that I will have firm faith in the future, work hard, and not relax. Excessive relaxation will only make me lazy and don't want to do anything. Therefore, in the future, I will devote my utmost energy to studying, finding a satisfactory job and returning to my family. (28)

I have worked very hard at school and won all kinds of certificates and scholarships, so my resume is better than other students. I was lucky that I didn't have much trouble finding a job. (P7)

Love Life

Participants stressed the importance of love for life in promoting their life enlightenment and embracing life positively.

The short-term of life may not be ideal, but the future is still smooth. Don't be swayed by considerations of temporary gains and losses. Always have love and passion in life. (P29)

Some participants mentioned that love for life helped them go through difficult times and turn bad things into good ones.

I am a person who loves life. Even if I encounter some bad things, I will turn it into a good one. (P31)

Cherish Life

Cherishing life was seen as an important part of life enlightenment by the participants, which helps them hold positive attitudes towards life.

"I didn't know how to cherish high school and college life, now I start to cherish the current young energy and hard work. (P13)

Participants also mentioned cherishing life made them look far beyond life's trifles and focus on important things.

Life is fragile, cherish the people you love, we don't know what will happen tomorrow, we don't care too much about trivial things. (P21)

Recognize Life

Recognizing life allows us to see life, to see reality. Participants mentioned there is a large difference between school and society, which helps them better embrace their life with inspiration.

In school, I can do nothing, but in work, I have to think about how to support my family, how to find a girlfriend, and deal with all kinds of life inconveniences. (P21)

...In school, there are people who teach us and lead us to learn, but in work, everything depends on ourselves, although the people in the department will teach us, everyone has their own job. (P9)

Participants also recognized there is a gap between ideal and reality, which is part of their life enlightenment.

It's not exactly what I expected. I expected to work in a good company with a good income, but the real situation is that the salary of the company is very low. (P12)

...it should not be difficult for me to find a job. If I work in a hospital, I should also like it, and the salary should not be low. After graduation, I found a big gap. (P17)

Participants found it difficult to find a satisfactory job, which is part of recognizing life.

In fact, it is not difficult to find a job, but it is difficult to find a company that you like, want to work and match your expertise. (P2)

After graduation, I understand that only when I am excellent can I have a good job. (P5)

Fierce competition in the job market was also recognized by the participants as part of their life enlightenment.

In recent years, a large number of people have participated in the preliminary examination to compete for a job position, and the average enrollment ratio is basically 1:100+. (P5)

In addition, participants described their life as filled with both pain and happiness, which constitutes their enlightenment for life.

Life is painful and happy. (P10)

Life is a mixture of joys and sorrows. (P21)

Learn to Live

The transition from school to work means the transition of two different lives, and it is essential that participants learn some basic life skills to survive at work. Learning to socialize was mentioned as an important skill for the workplace. Participants believed that the ability to interact and communicate with people was more important than the ability to do the work.

Dealing with people is also a very important lesson. Sometimes "what you can do" is not as good as "what you can say". If you can't get along with people, you may be eliminated. (P26)

Learn to learn reflected the importance of continuous learning to make sure you are always up to date and qualified for the work.

Learning ability is important. What we learn in school is different from what we encounter when we come out to work, so we have to learn to learn. (P2)

Participants also emphasized it is important to learn to adapt to society.

The environment will not change to adapt to you, so you need to change yourself to adapt to the environment. (P6)

Learning to improve yourself was also mentioned by participants as an important aspect of enlightenment for life.

This year's work and life experience tells me that only by constantly improving myself can I meet better people, achieve what I want, and see the big world that I have never seen. (P31)

In addition, participants stressed the importance of learning to regulate their emotions, which can help them effectively cope with negative experiences.

We should know how to relax ourselves and regulate our emotions. (P30)

One participant mentioned it is necessary to learn to be independent.

In life, we should learn to be independent, we should have the idea that everything can be done by ourselves, we should not rely on others. (P30)

Another participant mentioned it is important to learn to keep healthy.

We must keep a healthy body, do more exercise, no matter how busy we are, we must do more exercise, this is a very important point. (P27)

Discussion

Summary of the Findings

This is the first qualitative study exploring college graduates' negative life experiences after graduation from a university in China. In addition, we identified various strategies that college graduates utilized to cope with these negative experiences. Furthermore, we explored their enlightenment for life after the coping process. College graduates' negative life experiences were mainly focused on three aspects: negative work experience (eg, lack of adaptation, busy schedule, low salary), negative personal life experience (eg, multiple pressure, psychological problems, the hardship of life), and negative social life experience (eg, the incomprehension of those around you, complex interpersonal relationship, social complexity). The coping strategies they used can be classified into emotion-focused strategies (eg, accepting reality, self-persuasion, keeping a positive attitude, changing perspective), and problem-focused strategies (eg, goal-setting, asking for help to solve problems, persistence). As for life enlightenment, six themes emerged: accept life, strive for life, love life, cherish life, recognize life, and learn to live.

Our findings provide comprehensive and in-depth information on college graduates' negative life experiences after graduation, which helped us gain a thorough understanding of the common possible life challenges college graduates may encounter during the transition from school to work. In addition, we identified multiple strategies college graduates used to cope with those negative life experiences as well as their enlightenment for life. Our results provide important guidance for future research to design effective and targeted intervention programs to help college graduates better cope with negative life experiences and maintain well-being.

Negative Life Experiences

College graduates are confronted with a wide range of negative life experiences during the school-to-work transition, reflected in the workplace, their personal life, and social life. These negative experiences from multiple levels (ie, individual, interpersonal, organizational/institutional, and society) can put college graduates' mental health at risk, which suggests that we should look at college graduates' mental health using the lens of ecology.^{45,46} The multiple forces that exist at all social-ecological levels can facilitate or obstruct mental health, so interventions or actions to promote mental health should be targeted at various social-ecological levels.^{47,48}

Challenges and difficulties started as soon as college graduates began to hunt for jobs and continued throughout their whole career life after they found their jobs. Under the global pandemic of COVID-19, the job market has become increasingly competitive due to the widespread economic depression. Even if college graduates are fully prepared and well trained, they may still fail to get an ideal job or have to face repeated rejections, which are also widely acknowledged to be stressful experiences associated with negative psychological outcomes.⁴⁹ Take the national civil service examination as an example, it has been known as "Guokao" (national exam) in Mandarin due to its popularity among college graduates. This examination is an entrance ticket to land a secure government job with easy work and good salaries and benefits. Each year it has attracted hundreds and thousands of college graduates fighting for one position. As a result, most graduates have to face the result of being knocked out of the competition.⁵⁰ In response to the fierce job competition and the high unemployment rate among college graduates, the Chinese government has introduced a series of employment policies for college graduates to relieve their employment pressure and create opportunities for career development.^{51,52} Even after college students enter the workplace, they are still confronted with multiple challenges such as lack of work experience, busy work schedules, strict work requirements, complex interpersonal relationships, confusion and loss at work, low salaries, and work instability. All these challenges may lead to maladaptive problems among college graduates and make them unable to realize the smooth transition from school to the workplace.^{53,54} In response to these issues, multiple measures are needed to help college graduates to go through the transitions, such as

providing Jobsite training, appropriate workload arrangement, improvement of salaries, and creating a friendly workplace environment, etc.

College graduates also face multiple kinds of pressure in their personal life. Economic pressure is the topmost pressure for most college graduates, whether they find a job or not. For those who have a job, their economic income is not only used for covering their own living expenses, but also for supporting their families. Those who have not found a job completely rely on their families to provide financial support and face the double pressure of unemployment and financial independence. It is suggested that college graduates should be provided with the necessary training and support, as well as a certain time and space for growth and development. Graduates also face peer pressure when they compare themselves with other peers who are more successful in their careers or are compared with other peers by their family and friends. They should realize that a person's success is caused by many factors and each one has his own definition of success and unique path to success. It is also recommended that college graduates should be provided with more understanding and encouragement instead of comparison and irony. College graduates frequently encounter the pressure of multiple choices such as whether to work or continue their studies, what type of work, and what department to choose, it is important and useful to provide them with necessary counseling and guidance to help them make a reasonable choice. College graduates usually have to undertake multiple family responsibilities such as childcare, eldercare, and supporting the whole family, which may add a burden to graduates who are already overwhelmed by a heavy workload. It is suggested that family members should provide more understanding and support for college graduates instead of asking for support and contribution. Compared to carefree college life, college graduates will experience the hardship, weariness, boredom, and loneliness of life. All these life challenges may make college students vulnerable to negative emotions such as stress, depression, and anxiety. If these emotional issues persist for a long time, they will aggravate college graduates' mental state and lead to serious psychological problems. College graduates should form correct recognition of the difficulties and setbacks in their life, learn to self-regulate and seek psychological help and social support when needed, which has been shown to be effective in alleviating psychological stress and increasing life satisfaction.⁵⁵

As for negative social life experiences, college graduates are confronted with multiple challenges when dealing with other people. As soon they start looking for jobs, college graduates may experience a lack of understanding and support from their families and relatives. After they enter the workplace, they may feel it difficult to fit in the environment due to complex interpersonal relationships and lack of social experiences. Besides, they may constantly get negative feedback from colleagues who are unhappy with their job. All these negative experiences may lead to social dysfunction among college graduates. It is recommended that college graduates should be provided with more social training and social support to better prepare them for the new working environment and new social network.

Coping Strategies

College graduates utilized emotion-focused coping strategies and problem-focused coping strategies to deal with negative life experiences. Whether individuals employ problem-focused coping strategies, emotion-focused coping strategies, or a mixture of both, dealing with stress is subject to the situation and the individual's appraisal of the stressful situation.⁵⁶ A person's capacity to successfully adapt to adversities that threaten health functioning is a socio-ecological process rather than an individual trait.^{57,58} It should therefore be recommended that we should promote college graduates' capacity to cope from an ecological perspective including both internal and external ways. The external way is mainly to provide emotional, technical, and material support, with the ultimate goal of helping individuals internally correctly recognize difficulties and enhance the courage and ability to cope with difficulties.

Emotion-focused coping aims at regulating emotional stress by avoiding thinking about the threat or reappraising it.⁵⁹ Emotion regulation and a sense of mastery are about a person's "internal" way of dealing with life experiences by controlling emotions and by deciding whether to take action or to accept a given situation.³³ Emotional coping mechanisms and turning to the inner world have been determined to reduce distress and depression and to increase the quality of life.^{60,61} Those who employ a positive attitude as a coping strategy may be less likely to experience psychological distress.⁶² Coping strategies such as positive reframing, humor, and acceptance, were associated with better mental health.⁶³ Problem-focused coping strategies are aimed at helping individuals face the stressor and manage it

directly to reduce the overall stress.⁶⁴ According to our findings, problem-focused coping strategies include goal-setting, persistence, and asking for help to solve the problem, which showed that problem-focused coping strategies involve internal and external ways. On the whole, our study shows that participants were more likely to use positive and adaptive coping strategies, which also reflects the effect of education level on coping strategies. This was consistent with a study that reported that adaptive coping approaches were considerably related to education level.⁶⁵ Another explanation may be the participants' reluctance to talk about avoidance or maladaptive coping strategies that go against social expectations. Avoidance coping strategies may help reduce short-term stress, but they are generally considered unhealthy⁶⁶ and related to higher psychological distress.⁶⁷ Therefore, college graduates should be informed of the bad consequences of avoidance coping strategies and avoid using them. In addition, problem-focused coping strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies were positively associated with growth.⁶⁸ The experience of growth is related to lowered levels of distress.⁶⁹ So the facilitation of adversarial growth is necessary.

Enlightenment for Life

As for the enlightenment for life, participants were able to identify a large variety of life enlightenments, indicating their optimism, growth, psychological maturity,⁷⁰ and hope for life. Life is a process of continuous learning and growth, process-oriented individuals know that change is inherent in life and that negative experiences are unavoidable rather than avoiding these challenges and contradictions.³³ Life challenges are catalysts for the development of wisdom and facilitating factors for mental development.³³ Post-traumatic growth is the ability to find meaning in stressful experiences and gain a positive insight into one's perception of themselves, others, and the world.⁷¹ So what we have to do is help them grow quickly from these negative experiences.

Specifically, six themes emerged around the topic of life enlightenment: accept life, strive for life, love life, cherish life, recognize life, and learn to live. Acceptance of life represents a tolerant attitude to embrace the imperfections of life, which may help college graduates cope with the psychological distress caused by the widely present gap between expectations and reality in the workplace. Striving for life indicates a spirit of persistence that never gives up in front of difficulties, which is also essential in helping college graduates cope with various kinds of challenges during work. Both love and cherish for life represent optimistic attitudes towards life that promote the resilience and well-being of college graduates in front of adversities. Recognizing life represents wisdom and generosity in realizing the gaps and challenges in the workplace. This will motivate college graduates to improve themselves in various aspects such as communication skills, the ability to adapt to new work environments, problem-solving skills, professional maturity, and continuous learning.⁷² Learning to live reflects a combination of multiple life skills that cover various aspects of life. In the social aspect, college graduates should learn to improve their communication skills to obtain good interpersonal relationships. In the psychological aspect, they should learn to regulate and manage their negative emotions and maintain mental maturity and well-being. In the physical aspect, they should keep a healthy lifestyle and take good care of their health to maintain physical well-being. All these various aspects of life enlightenments are beneficial for college graduates to effectively cope with negative life experiences and transition smoothly from school to work.

Strengths and Limitations

There are several strengths to this study. First, this is the first study to explore negative life experiences among college graduates in China and to identify their coping strategies and life enlightenments, which fills in the research gap and provides valuable insights into this topic to inform the development of intervention strategy. Second, the phenomenological approach was found to be very useful in guiding this research. Specifically, the approach provided in-depth steps in the data collection and analysis procedures that facilitated obtaining testimonies that reflected the essence of the participants' experiences from their perspectives.

The main limitation of this study is the small sample size which may not represent the experiences and perspectives of other college graduates in other areas. However, we tried to diversify our sample using purposeful sampling by recruiting participants from various schools and majors to maximize sample heterogeneity. Another limitation is the application of an unvalidated questionnaire, which is determined by the qualitative study design.

Future studies should consider combining both quantitative and qualitative study designs by using both validated questionnaires and open-ended questionnaires to get more comprehensive and valid data. Furthermore, quantification of our results in a larger sample could improve the generalizability of these results to a wider population and investigate heterogeneity in responses. In addition, we did not ask participants more directly about the experiences that had the strongest effect on them, we did not talk about the effectiveness of coping strategies on their mental health, which can be considered for further exploration in future studies.

Conclusions

This study provided a comprehensive and deep insight into the negative life experiences, coping strategies, and life enlightenments of college graduates in China. Our findings showed that college graduates are confronted with various kinds of challenges in their work, personal life, and social life, which warrants further research and policy attention. In response to the negative life experiences, college graduates were able to utilize various kinds of coping strategies and hold various enlightenments for life, which are beneficial for them to overcome life challenges and transition smoothly from school to work. Our results provide important guidance for families, society, researchers, and policymakers to help college graduates go through the school-to-work transition and should be considered a first step into the development of tailored and effective intervention programs aiming to improve college graduates' well-being.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study involving human participants was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of Zunyi Medical University (Approval No: (2022) 4-002).

Data Sharing Statement

Data are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Informed Consent Statement

Participants who were interested to participate in the present study signed informed written consent.

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Author Contributions

All authors were involved in the study conception and design, contributed to the data collection and analysis, critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, provided administrative and technical support, and supervised the work; gave final approval of the version to be published; have agreed on the journal to which the article has been submitted; and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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