

Multiple Representations and Alleviation Strategies of Spiritual Strain Among Young College Students

WANG Zihao^[a]; ZHANG Xueliang^{[b],*}

^[a] School of Marxism, Qufu Normal University, Qufu, China.

^[b] Associate Professor, School of Marxism, Qufu Normal University, Qufu, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by the Special Project of Ideological and Political Theory Courses for College Teachers of the Ministry of Education, “Research on the Teaching Mode of Cultivating Historical Thinking of College Students in Ideological and Political Courses” (Project No. 23JDSZK059), and the Research Results of the Shandong Province University Student Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program, “Research on the Construction of the Spiritual World Dilemma and Its Construction of ‘Z Generation’ College Students” (Project No. S202310446083).

Received 7 February 2024; accepted 15 March 2024

Published online 26 April 2024

Abstract

The phenomenon of spiritual strain among young college students is widespread, manifested primarily as emotional repression caused by virtual socialization, comparison psychology caused by meritocracy, and “rumination” thinking caused by time anxiety. The causes of spiritual strain among young college students are diverse. To alleviate their spiritual strain, it is necessary to guide the development direction of college students with core values, improve a supervised and effective system for sharing educational resources, and create a fair and just social competition system.

Key words: Young college students; Spiritual strain; Representations; Alleviation

Wang, Z. H., & Zhang, X. L. (2024). Multiple Representations and Alleviation Strategies of Spiritual Strain Among Young College Students. *Canadian Social Science*, 20(2), 117-121. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/13401> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13401>

INTRODUCTION

In July 2022, a short video titled “Returning to the

Village for Three Days, My Uncle Cured My Spiritual Strain” sparked widespread discussion among various sectors of society on the internet, impacting and shocking young college students. Spiritual strain, also known as “psychological strain,” mainly refers to the excessive consumption of individual psychological resources due to the conflict between two conflicting ideas when individuals engage in self-control, resulting in mental fatigue. Enriching the spiritual world of the people is one of the essential requirements of Chinese-style modernization. Spiritual strain is a symptom of intense conflict in the spiritual world of college students. Therefore, to achieve the free and comprehensive development of young college students, it is necessary to summarize and alleviate their spiritual strain phenomenon.

1. SYMPTOMS: MULTIPLE REPRESENTATIONS OF SPIRITUAL STRAIN AMONG YOUNG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Marx once made a presumption about the condition of future society: “At that time, people ‘do not reproduce themselves in any particularity, but produce themselves in their totality.’” The ideal developmental state for college students should be free and comprehensive. However, spiritual strain leads them into a state of “partial” development. Focusing on the psychological level, spiritual strain among college students exhibits various manifestations.

1.1 Emotional repression caused by virtual socialization

Online social interaction is a virtual form of socialization in modern society. College students prioritize virtual interactions over real-life ones, resulting in negative emotions generated in real life and virtual interactions

that cannot be shared with “real people” and effectively resolved. This leads to the suppression of self-emotions in interpersonal relationships, excessive sensitivity, and feelings of inferiority. “Online virtual interaction is a supplement and extension of real interaction.” Present-day mobile phones, computers, and other instant communication devices provide college students with a space for socialization beyond time and space, promoting liberalized and diversified interactions. However, some students excessively rely on online socialization, pursuing the transient excitement brought by one-sided venting in segmented social circles. More active and dimensional emotional exchanges and spiritual communications in real-life social interactions are replaced by mechanical and rigid interactions. The inclination of college students towards “indirect interaction” in the online world and avoidance of “direct interaction” in the real world result in a lack of interpersonal communication skills in real-life situations, hindering the alleviation of self-emotions and ultimately leading to emotional repression. This is manifested in individuals being extremely sensitive to emotions, constantly pondering over others’ opinions: “Did I say something wrong just now?” “Is he/she annoyed with me?” Continuous self-criticism and self-deprecation due to this sensitive and inferior mindset keep college students trapped in emotional lows, leading to self-estrangement.

1.2 Comparison psychology caused by meritocracy

The essence of meritocracy lies in the obsession with “talent” and “achievements,” believing that all achievements based on “talent” and “deservedness” are moral and just. This logic, emphasizing that “those with outstanding achievements succeed, while those with poor achievements fail,” on the one hand facilitates fair competition among college students, but on the other hand, it generates extreme feelings of exhaustion and alienation. The performance-oriented nature of meritocracy leads to a sense of fatigue. Under the baton of excessive pursuit and performance priority, college students breed a strong sense of competitive comparison. They continuously push themselves to “work overtime studying,” with the ultimate goal not being to create self-value but to win in competition with others, believing that only in this way can they maintain their precarious position. As Han Bingzhe said, “The exhausted and depressed achiever constantly consumes the self. In the battle with oneself, he suffers from unbearable agony.” The enormous pressure generated in competition with others transforms into anxiety about one’s own development prospects. They have to exhaust all their time and energy to achieve better performance and more favorable positions, exacerbating the situation of self-exploitation. The isolated individual characteristics under meritocracy intensify the sense of fatigue. Since college students’ grades are the main focus of assessment,

cooperation is easily alienated into a means to achieve personal merit. Consequently, sincere and harmonious group life is gradually dismantled, and the collective and others’ functions in alleviating individuals’ exhaustion of psychological and cognitive resources caused by competition become increasingly weak. College students exacerbate the trend of self-exploitation in comparison.

1.3 “Rumination” thinking caused by time anxiety

According to the “2020 China College Student Health Survey Report,” issues related to time management have become one of the most concerning psychological topics among college students. Moderate time anxiety can enhance individuals’ initiative, but excessive time anxiety can cause significant depletion of psychological energy and cognitive abilities, leading to serious spiritual strain in an endless loop of anxiety. Time anxiety manifests as college students being trapped in a vicious cycle of conflict between the rhythm of real-time and the rhythm of ideal time. “The rhythm of real-time is subject to the arrangement of social time and the constraints of social norms.” Under the coercion of social pressure, college students’ “self-comfort rhythm” is gradually replaced by the “clockwork-like self.” On the one hand, college students hope to escape the fear of “lagging behind” by idealizing the execution of time scripts, meeting the demands for self and others’ construction, and always presenting an image of efficiency and fulfillment. Any deviation from the imagined path will lead to intense self-conflict. On the other hand, faced with anxiety generated by fast-paced life, college students expect to relieve themselves by actively slowing down. However, this passive “time acceleration” conflicts with college students’ active “expectation of slowing down.” The intensification of “rumination” thinking caused by time anxiety makes college students excessively entangled and regretful, resulting in significant self-depletion of psychological and cognitive resources. “Nolen-Hoeksema (1991) believes that rumination thinking can lead to individuals experiencing feelings of depression, despair, repeatedly thinking about the causes of these symptoms, worrying about various consequences, and forcing themselves to experience this negative state. Behaviorally, it manifests as hesitation and indecision without taking any positive strategies to solve the problem.” This psychological struggle renders college students unable to engage in reasonable time management and utilization when facing new situations. The more catastrophized the contradiction between ideal time and real-time is considered, and the more attention and reflection are placed on the irrational aspects of time management, the less rational the perception of time becomes. Consequently, college students subject themselves to closed-loop regulations and condemnation, ultimately falling into a vicious cycle of spiritual strain.

2. GENERATION: DIVERSIFIED ATTRIBUTION OF SPIRITUAL STRAIN AMONG YOUNG COLLEGE STUDENTS

The generation of spiritual strain among college students is not accidental. Firstly, it arises due to the echo chamber effect, preventing students from timely nurturing their spiritual world. Secondly, the development of individualized society has shattered the integrity of the self-structure. Lastly, the imbalance between instrumental rationality and value rationality in higher education has created a spiritual crisis among college students.

2.1 Coupling the Echo Chamber Effect with Negative Life Views and Values

The term “echo chamber” originates from Cass Sunstein’s “Republic.com,” where he argues that while the internet brings convenient information searching, people “only listen to what they have chosen and what pleases them.” In contemporary society, young college students deeply immerse themselves in various new media platforms, interpreting the scenario of being “online at all times and everywhere.” They excessively select information they like, forming their own “echo chamber.” Various social ideologies breed and spread within it, exhibiting a mutually entangled trend. In this “echo chamber,” various complex information intertwines with negative values and life views in the spiritual world of college students, profoundly affecting their mental state. The value system of the “Z generation” college students is still in the formative stage. The intervention of diverse value concepts easily triggers severe contradictory attitudes, leading to their extreme emotions. Influenced by diverse ideologies, college students hold arrogant sentiments and restless psychology towards society and life. Their thinking and cognitive abilities suffer significant damage, plunging them into the vortex of spiritual strain.

2.2 The Disconnection of Individualized Social Relationships Breaks the Integrity of the Self-Structure

“In modern society, there is a trend towards individualization, where ‘individualization’ refers to the transformation of people’s identities from ‘receivers’ to ‘responsibles’ and making actors responsible for completing tasks and accountable for the consequences of their actions.” In this context, college students often immerse themselves in their busy lives due to a sense of urgency to complete tasks, interacting only with a few close relationships and reducing participation in collective activities. However, “the essence of human beings is not the abstract entity inherent in individuality, but in its reality, it is the sum of all social relations.” As social beings, people hope to gain individual recognition and group identity in collective life. Currently, college students are only immersed in their own lives, and this hesitation

in moving from individualization to collectivization causes the sense of unity and collective consciousness among college students to gradually dissolve, blocking the pathway for expressing their negative emotions collectively. College students navigate and struggle within their self-world, leading to doubt and denial of the self and thus perpetuating spiritual strain.

2.3 Imbalance between Instrumental Rationality and Value Rationality in Higher Education Leads to Spiritual Vacuum

The debate between value rationality and instrumental rationality is an unavoidable contradiction in the process of human modernization. Value rationality is action based on unconditional, pure, and exclusive specific values determined by ethical, aesthetic, and other factors, irrespective of direct hopes and consequences. On the other hand, instrumental rationality confirms the utility of tools through reality, treating external objects as “conditions” or “means” to achieve rational expectations for self-struggle. Consequently, the pursuit of maximal effectiveness of things and the realization of human utility are the fundamental purposes of instrumental rationality, whereas value rationality seeks the inherent truth, goodness, and beauty within things and does not emphasize the consequences of actions, focusing on ideal beliefs and humanistic values.

Under the prevalence of instrumental rationality in universities, individual spiritual worlds of college students suffer from loss and scarcity. Scarcity is the root of alienation, and the proliferation of instrumental rationality may lead to irrational consequences, namely, “the retreat of ultimate values leads to the dispersion of meaning, the repression and shrinking of human nature result in the collapse of freedom.” Although striving for progress, excellence, and surpassing rigid standards to a certain extent can promote college students’ high responsibility for their self-lives, it also creates a constantly regulated “self.” Activities initially governed by individuals now control their spirits and behaviors. Under the domination of the desire for success, the “utility-first” value concept generated by college students’ pursuit of extremely limited high-quality educational resources eradicates the humanistic spirit and value beliefs that higher education should possess. Consequently, college students fall into the myth of utilitarianism, engaging only superficially or falsely in academic achievements, student work, research competitions, social practices, etc., creating an illusion of self-comprehensive development and losing their original aspirations and beliefs. This occupation of space squeezes out the depth of knowledge necessary for independent thinking among college students. In pursuit of speed, college students commonly choose to overlook high-quality, slow-paced development, eventually leading to “partial development” and falling into the trap of spiritual strain.

3. HEALING: STRATEGIES FOR ALLEVIATING SPIRITUAL STRAIN AMONG YOUNG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Guiding college students out of the trap of spiritual strain requires multifaceted efforts. At the level of values, it is essential to enhance college students' ability to resist the impact of diverse values. At the educational level, it is necessary to establish a sound system for sharing educational resources. At the societal level, creating a fair and just social competition system is crucial.

3.1 Guiding College Students' Development Direction with Core Values

Currently, college students are entangled in various negative social ideologies such as materialism and hedonism. Therefore, it is necessary to guide college students to establish firm ideal beliefs by the cohesive and compelling force of socialist core values, and to eliminate various value concepts that cause spiritual strain. On the one hand, it is essential to consolidate the ideological high ground and unwaveringly adhere to the dominant position of Marxism in the ideological field. College students should be inspired by the truth of Marxism and internalize the socialist core values, consciously eliminating various negative values that contradict mainstream societal values, and leading them to become new-era youth who adhere to truth and ideals. On the other hand, it is important to strengthen education on the "Chinese Dream," nurturing college students' patriotic sentiments, and externalizing the realization of the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation into actions, maintaining the spirit of humility and hard work. The essence of spiritual strain is "thinking too much and doing too little." To solve this contradiction, it is necessary to overcome the barrier between ideals and reality, not forgetting the original intention, remembering the mission, and investing in the socialist modernization construction with a sense of responsibility and practical spirit, closely linking one's own destiny with the destiny of the country, and resolving the troubles of spiritual strain in the fervor of practice.

3.2 Improving the Supervision and Effective Sharing of Education Resources

In addition, effective supervision of resource allocation is crucial to whether the efficiency of resource sharing can be realized. Ensuring that education resources are under transparent and open supervision throughout the entire process of decision-making, implementation, and evaluation requires action in several areas: First, it is necessary to improve higher education laws and regulations to establish a solid legal foundation for the supply and distribution of education resources. Strict law enforcement and zero tolerance for corruption and bribery in resource supply and distribution should

be implemented. Second, it is essential to establish a supervision and management system led by the government with the participation of various social entities. Encouraging participation from teachers, students, and managers at all levels and levels of society in the decision-making and management of education resource allocation enhances the ability of multiple entities to provide suggestions and opinions. Third, it is necessary to fully utilize big data methods to explore quantitative indicators for resource allocation. Currently, modern big data methods have not been fully utilized to enhance the efficiency of resource allocation, especially for "spiritual resources, which are difficult to inspect and quantify due to their invisibility, are in a blind spot for supervision," leading to unfair resource distribution. Therefore, efforts should be made to enhance the breadth and depth of interventions in the education resource allocation system based on data algorithm systems and improve the efficiency of allocation.

3.3 Building a Fair and Just Social Competition System

Since the reform and opening up, the post-80s and post-90s generations have risen rapidly with the dividend of the times. However, some individuals have solidified their vested interests after achieving social mobility, leading to social class differentiation. Therefore, it is necessary to open up social mobility channels and establish a fair and just social competition system. Specifically, it is important to establish and improve the "last come, first out" system. Marx said: "In communist society, nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic." The creativity of individuals is limited within a certain period of time, so it is necessary to timely adjust and enrich the social activities that are poor, one-sided, and fixed. This is an inevitable requirement to improve the resource allocation system and build a fair and just system. Specifically, it involves establishing certain assessment standards and supervision mechanisms, improving industry management efficiency, and reducing redundant labor and excessive inventory to enable some practitioners who have lost their creativity to withdraw from the current work environment in a timely manner and provide job opportunities for new forces in the industry to join.

REFERENCES

- Wang, L. L., & Li, W. (2023). Struggle and Healing: Representations, Origins, and Coping Strategies of Youth Spiritual Strain. *China Youth Research*, (03), 40-47.

- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2009). *Collected Works of Marx and Engels: Volume 1*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Chen, S. J., & Bi, H. M. (2023). Crisis Review, Emergence Causes and Resolution of Network Social Interaction Among College Students. *China Youth Research*, (08), 113-119.
- Wang, J. H. (2022). Why Does Meritocracy Fail in Higher Education? *Journal of Suzhou University (Education Science Edition)*, 10(04), 1-12.
- Han, B. Z. (2019). *The Exhausted Society*. Beijing: CITIC Publishing Group.
- Chen, Z. Y., et al. (2023). *Report on the Mental Health Status of Chinese College Students in 2022*. Retrieved from <http://psy.china.com.cn> on August 11, 2023.
- Gu, Y. L. (2023). Discussion on Youth Time Anxiety. *Studies on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*, (02), 102-109.
- Luo, G. X. (2022). *The Impact of Ruminative Thinking on Forgiveness Among College Students: The Mediating Role of Self-Depletion and the Moderating Role of Psychological Resilience*. Jilin University.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2008). *Republic.com 2.0*. Beijing: Law Press China.
- Li, B. L., & Shao, S. (2022). No Stable Residence, No Fertility: Research on Housing Conditions and Fertility Intentions of Young People. *China Youth Research*, (03), 53-62+104.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2012). *Selected Works of Marx and Engels: Volume 1*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Ai, S. L. (1994). Habermas's Transformation of Weber's Rationality Theory. *Seeking Truth Journal*, (01), 29-35.
- Lin, Y. Q. (2021). Exhausted Breakthrough: Manifestations, Harms, and Coping Strategies of College Student Internalization Phenomenon. *Contemporary Youth Research*, (03), 88-93.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1995). *Collected Works of Marx and Engels: Volume 1*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.