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PSYCHOLOGICAL PREDICAMENTS AND INTERVENTION PATHWAYS AMONG CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS UNDER DUAL FILIAL PIETY TENSIONS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY GROUNDED IN SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Background: Many Chinese college students experience significant difficulties with meaning in life and self-regulation, leading to states often described as *"Emptiness Syndrome "(Kongxinbing, 空心病)*. The prevalence and characteristics of this phenomenon necessitate exploration of its deep-rooted cultural and psychological mechanisms. This study constructs an integrative framework combining Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the Dual Filial Piety Model (DFPM), and the concept of self-acceptance to analyze the chained mechanism linking cultural motivational conflict, thwarted psychological needs, and impaired self-regulation. The aim is to develop culturally sensitive intervention modules.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 first-year college students who identified as having low levels of meaning in life based scores of (MLQ-C, M = 2.51) and poor self-regulation ability (TC-SRQ, M = 2.44). Thematic analysis using NVivo 12 was employed to identify underlying mechanisms and psychological needs.

Results: 1.*Filial piety conflicts emerged as the core cultural origin*

100%(10/10) displayded reciprocal filial piety tendencies,80% (8/10) exhibited coexisting authoritarian filial piety (obedience-focused), and 60% (6/10) manifested a "gratitude-guilt-compromise" dynamic, triggering introjected regulation.

2.*Intergenerational interactions undermined basic psychological needs:*

Conflicting expectations and communication barriers systematically thwarted autonomy (7/10), relatedness (8/10), and competence (8/10).

3.*Low self-acceptance was identified as a key mediating factor*

Low self-acceptance (10/10) and other-evaluation dependency (8/10) exacerbated regulatory fragility.Transitional signs of ‘transformative self-acceptance’ emerged in 4 participants, informing intervention pathways..

Conclusion: The core mechanism underlying low sense of life meaning and poor self-regulation is a three-level structural dysregulation:

Cultural level: Conflicts within dual filial piety result in externalized motivation;

Familial level: Intergenerational control patterns suppress fulfillment of basic psychological needs;

Individual level: Low self-acceptance impedes internalization of meaning and resilience in self-regulation.

Interventions should follow an integration pathway of motivation–values–regulation:

(1) Transform filial piety tension (replacing obligation locks with emotional resonance);

(2) Repair need satisfaction (autonomy-supportive intergenerational communication);

(3) Cultivate transformational self-acceptance deconstructing other-evaluation dependency, anchoring intrinsic values);

(4) Synergistically enhance meaning in life and self-regulation ability.

Collectively, these steps achieve culturally-adaptive advancement.

Keywords: Self-Determination Theory; Dual Filial Piety Model; Self-Acceptance; Meaning in Life; Self-Regulation; *Emptiness Syndrome*; Culturally Adaptive Interventions; College Student Mental Health

1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Meaning in life constitutes a cornerstone of human well-being and flourishing, with the pursuit of meaning recognized as a fundamental and primary life drive (Steger & Martela, 2022). However, in the digital era, pervasive social media engagement has profoundly reconfigured adolescents’ social interaction patterns. Evidence indicates that frequent online interactions attenuate face-to-face relationship building, impede the formation of deep meaning, and disrupt effective self-regulation strategies (Twenge, 2019). College students, overwhelmed by excessive information, may lose their sense of direction and clarity, leading to self-doubt, diminished self-worth, and increasing mental health concerns coupled with weakened regulatory capacities (Twenge, 2020).

Furthermore, contemporary students generally show lower levels of resilience in facing challenges. Gabrielova and Buchko (2021) attribute this to overprotection or excessive control from parents during their upbringing, which impedes the development of emotional regulation and self-awareness. Twenge (2017) noted that today’s youth are maturing more slowly than previous generations, and this delayed pace intensifies the emergence of meaninglessness and self-regulatory dysfunction.

In China, college students face similar yet more acute challenges. The convergence of utilitarian educational systems and heightened parental expectations has trapped many in a state of "aimlessness, apathy, and meaninglessness"—termed *Emptiness Syndrome (Kongxinbing)* (Xu, 2016). Studies reveal alarming prevalence rates: 30.4% among Peking University freshmen, escalating to 56.4% at some institutions (Yang et al., 2023). Symptoms typically include emotional numbness, loss of self-worth, and weak regulatory ability, with a core deficit in perceived meaning in life (Zhu et al., 2017). This syndrome

frequently co-occurs with identity diffusion (delayed self-identity resolution) (Li et al., 2024), hindering clarity on existential questions ("Who am I?" and "Who should I become?"). Additionally, prolonged dependency on parents for daily living tasks during development, coupled with deficient experience in autonomous problem-solving, leaves some students ill-equipped to navigate real-world challenges upon entering university. This manifests as 'delayed maturation syndrome' (Giant baby)(Chen, 2019), characterized by helplessness in adult responsibilities, which further erodes self-regulatory capacity and impairs goal-construction skills (Guo, 2023; Tan & Li, 2019), establishing a self-perpetuating cycle.

More fundamentally, filial piety, as a core organizing principle in traditional Chinese culture, systematically structures familial socialization practices (Yeh & Bedford, 2003; Chao & Tseng, 2002). College students not only carry the moral obligation to bring honor to their families but also struggle to balance personal development with parental expectations(Yeh, 2003). This intergenerational motivational conflict (autonomy needs vs. filial duties), stemming from authoritarian filial piety practices, often induces externalized or introjected regulation rather than integrated/intrinsic motivation(Yeh & Bedford, 2003; Ge et al., 2022). Consequently, it fundamentally undermines autonomous motivation development and self-determination(Deci & Ryan, 2000) . The epidemic of "emptiness" and meaninglessness epitomizes this systemic familial motivational dysfunction (Xun, 2023).

Existing psychological interventions for college students often focus on emotional expression, coping skills, or time management (Pandey et al., 2018; Manco & Hamby, 2021). While some programs incorporate cognitive-behavioral or emotion regulation techniques, they frequently lack theoretical integration and cultural sensitivity (Hou & Liu, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Most fail to address the deeper psychological mechanisms of motivational conflict rooted in cultural values (e.g., filial piety), basic psychological need frustration (particularly autonomy), or the resultant motivational deficits (Hou & Liu, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Few interventions explicitly address the co-development of life meaning and self-regulatory capacities. Therefore, there is a pressing need for interventions that are both theoretically robust (integrating SDT, DFPM, etc.) and culturally responsive, and that jointly enhance the closely interrelated psychological constructs of life meaning and self-regulation.

To respond systematically to these issues, this study integrates Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the Dual Filial Piety Model (DFPM), and the construct of self-acceptance into a three-pronged theoretical framework. SDT posits that optimal psychological functioning requires the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The extent to which these needs are fulfilled is closely linked to individuals' experiences of life meaning (Martela & Ryan, 2016). Conversely, externally controlling environments and conditional value systems disrupt alignment with intrinsic values, leading to existential confusion and diminished meaning. In the Chinese cultural context, students' motivational structures and intergenerational interactions are profoundly influenced by filial piety. DFPM distinguishes between authoritarian filial piety and reciprocal filial piety—the latter being more strongly associated with gratitude, emotional support, and relational harmony, and thus more conducive to the development of intrinsic motivation (Yeh & Bedford, 2003). Empirical studies have shown that authoritarian filial values are often linked to thwarted autonomy and hindered motivation, whereas reciprocal filial values support autonomy and relatedness, thus facilitating meaning construction and psychological integration (Li et al., 2023). However, existing studies have mostly relied on quantitative surveys or theoretical deductions, with few delving into students' lived experiences of cultural value conflicts and their psychological needs.

Self-acceptance serves as a central mediating mechanism in this integrative model. It is both a prerequisite for autonomy development and motivational integration, and a key psychological process that differentiates between internalization pathways under distinct filial piety orientations (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Yeh & Bedford, 2003). Conditional self-worth under authoritarian filial norms weakens self-acceptance, whereas reciprocal filial piety fosters more stable self-identity and intrinsic value alignment through emotional support and relational affirmation (Yeh & Bedford, 2003; Bedford & Yeh, 2019). As such, self-acceptance mediates the psychological linkage between cultural values, motivational structures, regulatory strategies, and the experience of meaning.

In sum, against the backdrop of globalization and digital transformation, Chinese college students' struggles with meaninglessness and poor self-regulation are rooted not only in developmental instability but also in familial control patterns,particularly authoritarian filial norms, and structural societal pressures. Current intervention approaches largely address surface-level symptoms and coping strategies, without tackling the core motivational disruptions or underlying cultural conflicts. There is thus an urgent need to design a culturally grounded and theoretically integrated intervention module that targets both life meaning and self-regulation in a synergistic manner.

In response, this study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in the lived experiences of students. Drawing on SDT, DFPM, and the construct of self-acceptance, it builds a theoretical framework to explore the inner mechanisms of motivational conflict, regulatory dysfunction, and meaninglessness. The goal is to generate empirical insights and design guidelines for developing structured intervention modules that enhance meaning in life and self-regulation ability through the integration of SDT, DFPM, and self-acceptance.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary method to conduct a needs analysis among first-year Chinese college students with low levels of meaning in life and self-regulation ability. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Dual Filial Piety Model (DFPM), and incorporating the concept of self-acceptance, the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of students' psychological mechanisms within their cultural context and their needs for intervention, thereby providing empirical support for the subsequent development of intervention modules.

2.2 Recruitment and Sample

The study was conducted at a comprehensive university in Nanning, Guangxi, selected based on both the feasibility of sample acquisition and the high alignment between the psychological characteristics of the student population and the study's objectives. The research team maintained a collaborative relationship with the university's Student Development Center, facilitating access to participants for in-depth interviews. Furthermore, the student body's diverse regional backgrounds enhanced the representativeness of the sample.

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit 8–15 first-year undergraduate students at the selected university. Interviews continued until data saturation was reached. Inclusion criteria were as follows:

Enrolled as a first-year college student;

Exhibiting low levels of meaning in life and poor self-regulation (as identified through recommendations by counselors or peers and confirmed via standardized scales for meaning in life and self-regulation ability);

Willing to participate voluntarily with informed consent;
Possessing basic communication abilities and capable of articulating personal experiences.
Prior research on the *"Emptiness Syndrome" (Kongxinbing)*phenomenon among university students in China indicates that students in lower academic years exhibit a higher tendency toward this issue, with first-year students being most affected (Zhu, 2024). Hence, the intervention targeted this specific cohort.
Exclusion criteria included:
Students who did not grow up in a stable two-parent household (e.g., single-parent families with prolonged absence of one parent, restructured families with stepparents entering during or after adolescence, or long-term parental separation/divorce occurring during early childhood);
Adolescents currently undergoing treatment for diagnosed mental health disorders;
Individuals with a history of severe psychiatric illness.
To control for the heterogeneity in intergenerational interaction patterns—particularly how parental dynamics influence filial practices—only students raised in stable nuclear families with both biological parents living together were included. The study focused on early intervention rather than treatment, thus participants were required to be free from any current clinical diagnosis (based on DSM-5 or ICD-11 criteria) and to have no history of severe mental illness.
To ensure reliability and validity, the research team conducted a preliminary phone screening to assess each candidate's psychological status, willingness to participate, and understanding of the study's purpose.
Sample Limitations: This study aimed to explore psychological mechanisms within a specific population in depth; further validation in more diverse samples will be necessary in future research.

2.3 Data Collection

Ethical approval was obtained from the host university. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed of the study's objectives and potential risks. All participants signed informed consent forms and were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. A licensed psychological counselor was available in case of any emotional distress during participation.
A semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A1) was developed, covering five main thematic dimensions, as shown in Table 2.1:

Table 2.1 Main Thematic Dimensions of Semi-Structured Interview

Dimension	Theoretical Basis	Sample Questions
Meaning in Life	Theory of Meaning in Life (Steger et al., 2006)	"How do you understand the meaning of life?"
Self-Regulation Challenges	Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000)	"How do you cope with stress or challenges?"
Filial Beliefs & Family Impact	Dual Filial Piety Model (Yeh & Bedford, 2003)	"How do you understand filial piety? " "How do family expectations influence your choices?"
Self-Acceptance	Theory of Self-Compassion (Neff, 2003)	"How do you view your strengths and weaknesses?"

Dimension	Theoretical Basis	Sample Questions
Preferences for Intervention	Participatory Intervention Framework (Nation et al., 2003)	"What kind of psychological support would you find helpful?"

It is worth noting that "frustration of basic psychological needs" was not a pre-defined interview category but emerged inductively during thematic analysis. This emergent theme aligns with the core tenets of Self-Determination Theory, reflecting the study's openness and inductive approach in handling interview data.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, with adjustments based on content depth. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim afterward. Transcripts were returned to participants for verification to ensure the accuracy of their expression.

All interviews were conducted on campus and concluded when no new insights were being generated ("data saturation"). The transcripts were anonymized, with all personal identifiers and place names removed to protect participant confidentiality.

2.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). At the initial stage, the research team referred to the study's objectives and key issues identified in relevant literature. The preliminary coding framework was informed by SDT's core psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness), DFPM's dual dimensions of filial piety (authoritarian and reciprocal), and essential elements of self-acceptance. Nevertheless, the analysis maintained an open stance to accommodate emergent themes from the data.

Following initial coding, member-checking was conducted with selected participants to validate interpretations. The research team held regular discussions to review the analytic process and ensure intercoder consistency.

NVivo 12 software was used for data organization and coding. NVivo 12 facilitated data management and code clustering. Through constant comparative refinement, nine distinct yet interconnected meta-themes crystallized, forming the foundational architecture for subsequent intervention development.

2.5 Ethical Compliance

Participant privacy was rigorously protected throughout the study. All data were anonymized and securely stored in encrypted formats.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Sample

This study recruited 10 first-year undergraduates with balanced gender distribution (5 male, 5 female) and matched urban-rural backgrounds (5 urban, 5 rural) across science, engineering, and business disciplines. Participants demonstrated notably low scores on both target constructs: the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ-C; Liu & Gan, 2010) yielded a mean of 2.51 (significantly below the theoretical scale midpoint of 4.0), while the Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ; Tsai et al., 2019) showed a mean of 2.44 (significantly below its midpoint of 3.5). Interviewees exhibited significant commonalities in areas such as ambiguity regarding life meaning, difficulties in emotional regulation, and perceived intergenerational pressures, providing a foundational basis for subsequent analyses of cultural motivation and psychological systems.

3.2 Cultural Motivation Structures and Value Orientation Conflicts

3.2.1 Internalized Conflict of Dual Filial Piety

Interview data revealed that participants generally held a dual-belief structure encompassing both *authoritarian filial piety* and *reciprocal filial piety*. These filial beliefs could be further divided into three subtypes under reciprocal filial piety and four subtypes under authoritarian filial piety, as summarized in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Typology and Characteristics of Filial Piety Beliefs

Filial Piety Type	Subtype	Key Descriptors	Typical Expressions or Behaviors	Number of Participants
Reciprocal Filial Piety	Emotional Support & Understanding	Encouragement, presence, empathy, being needed, spiritual identification	"My mother didn't scold me after I failed the exam; she encouraged me and supported me" (P8); "Filial piety is about gratitude and understanding based on self-awareness" (P3)	2
	Responsibility & Material Support	Guilt, compensation, financial stress, repaying, working part-time	"I take tutoring jobs to lessen the financial burden, otherwise I'd feel more guilty" (P8); "All family resources are invested in me, so I want to succeed and give back" (P7)	6
	Respect & Autonomous Decision-Making	Respect, autonomy, empathy without interference	"Being filial isn't blind obedience but not making parents feel rejected despite the generational gap" (P5); "My parents respect my decisions and don't judge" (P9)	6
Authoritarian Filial Piety	Passive Acceptance	Obedience, ambiguity, dependency, lack of reflection	"My parents want me to succeed, so I study hard" (P1); "I don't have a clear vision for the future, so I just follow their guidance" (P5)	2
	Compliance-Oriented	Compromise, sacrifice interests, avoiding conflict	"They interfered with my plans; I didn't want conflict, so I compromised" (P3); "I accepted their advice about changing majors" (P4); "Though it goes against my passion, I chose finance to respect them" (P8)	4
	Duty-Oriented	Instrumental obligation, family duty, moral expectations	"Filial piety is supporting my parents—it's my duty" (P6); "They expect me to study hard, find a good job, and support the family" (P7)	6

All participants (10/10) endorsed some form of reciprocal filial piety. Among them, the Emotional Support subtype (2/10) emphasized unconditional support; the Responsibility subtype (6/10) reflected return intentions motivated by guilt and pressure; the Respect subtype (6/10) indicated relatively autonomous family environments.

Eight participants (8/10) also expressed beliefs consistent with authoritarian filial piety. Passive Acceptance (2 participants) showed habitual compliance with parental authority, Compliance-Oriented (4 participants) focused on avoiding conflict, and Duty-Oriented (6 participants) treated filial piety as a social and moral obligation.

As shown in Table 3.1, multiple subtypes often coexisted within the same individual. For example, P8 simultaneously exhibited Emotional Support (reciprocal), Responsibility subtype (authoritarian), and Compliance-Oriented subtype (authoritarian), revealing a triadic motivational tension of gratitude, guilt, and compromise. Filial beliefs frequently presented in combined forms, as detailed in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Patterns of Combined Filial Piety Beliefs Among Participants

Combination Pattern	Number of Participants	Participants	Description
Reciprocal-dominant, Authoritarian-integrated	4	P3, P5, P8, P10	Express gratitude but are still influenced by parental expectations in major life decisions
Authoritarian-dominant, Weak Reciprocal	3	P1, P6, P7	Exhibit obedience without strong emotional bonds, treating filial piety as duty or task
Reciprocal-dominant, Minimal Compliance	2	P4, P9	Emphasize autonomy and material support, but show limited emotional connection
Lack of Emotional Expression, Cognitive Vagueness	1	P2	Vague understanding of filial piety, with minimal concrete behavior or internalized commitment

From the above, despite the general coexistence of dual filial piety among contemporary students, they are not always harmonious. When facing critical life decisions (e.g., academic or career choices, independence), significant internal motivational conflict emerges. Students oscillate between "self-determination" and "fulfilling expectations," torn between "passive compliance" and "grateful reciprocity." This internal conflict reflects one of the cultural roots of their developmental struggles.

Notably, while reciprocal filial piety is widely acknowledged, it is often transformed into a *guilt-driven exchange* (e.g., P8 working part-time to alleviate guilt), where emotional bonds give way to instrumental responsibilities, thereby weakening the function of intrinsic motivation. Some participants express gratitude verbally, yet their actual behaviors deviate from personal values due to guilt and compliance, suggesting that filial motivation has not been fully internalized as a stable value system. This motivational tension lays the groundwork for conflict in future decision-making and identity formation.

3.2.2 Differentiated Sources of Life Meaning Under Filial Piety Structures

Under the influence of filial internalization mechanisms, participants' meaning-making pathways exhibited fragmented diversification, manifesting coexisting yet unintegrated orientations toward family devotion, intrinsic fulfillment, social responsibility, and experiential freedom, as summarized in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3. Distribution and Expressions of Life Meaning Sources

Orientation Type	Key Descriptors	Representative Quotes	Number of Participants
Family-Oriented	Family well-being, filial duty, parental expectations	"I study hard to improve my family's life and avoid disappointing them." (P3); "Being with parents and ensuring their happiness matters most." (P8)	5
Self-Realization-Oriented	Ideal self, inner values, personal goals	“Life is about becoming the person I aspire to be” (P2); “Becoming a better version of myself” (P4); “Doing what I love within limited time” (P5)	3
Social Responsibility-Oriented	Contributing to society, legacy, collective growth	“Stability matters, but I also hope to contribute to society” (P2); “Life’s meaning is to serve the country and society” (P10)	3
Experiential Freedom-Oriented	Enjoying life, exploration, novelty	“Life is about enjoying beauty, food, travel with friends” (P6); “Life means feeling joys and sorrows, exploring new things and people” (P3); “Staying happy and free is what matters most” (P9)	6

Note: Total >10 due to co-occurrence of types.

60% participants (6/10) expressed conflicting values, simultaneously holding two or more orientations. Many struggled between “living for parents” and “living for oneself.” For instance, P2 wanted to contribute to society but was unsure how; P5 emphasized both supporting parents and pursuing personal desires. Aspirations for autonomy and experiential freedom were evident but not fully internalized, while social and material orientations often reflected tension between ideals and reality.

This structural “failure of value integration” suggests an absence of a coherent life priority system and a lack of stable behavioral strategies. In particular, family-oriented motivations often carry an authoritarian undertone, reflecting externally imposed goals rather than self-endorsed purposes. This externally controlled motivation undermines directionality and clarity, sowing the seeds of future existential uncertainty.

3.3 Psychological System Disruption and Weakening of Self-Structure

3.3.1 Intergenerational Conflicts Under Dual Filial Piety and Their Impacts

Guided by authoritarian and reciprocal filial piety dynamics, participants universally experienced three intergenerational conflict patterns: expectation-reality mismatches, emotional repression and communication barriers, and lifestyle control. Several participants reported experiencing more than one form of conflict (e.g., P2). Key manifestations are systematized in Table 3.4:

Table 3.4 Types and Manifestations of Intergenerational Conflict

Conflict Type	Key Features	Representative Statements	Number of Participants

expectation-reality mismatches	Unrealistic demands, skill-interest mismatch, decision regret	"Persuaded parents to choose my preferred major but found it unsuitable—now regret rejecting their teaching career advice." (P2); "My parents demanded perfect scores in every subject, which caused immense pressure and anxiety, even resistance to studying, affecting my interest and creativity" (P8); "They always try to transfer their experience to me, but I find it irrelevant. I ignored them and chose a major I liked, but now I feel lost due to poor job prospects and academic difficulty" (P4)	6
Emotional Repression and Communication Barriers	Emotional suppression, communication obstacles, guilt, emotional burden	"Mom guilt-trips me when I share struggles—now I only report good news." (P1); "I once vented to them, but they told me that I chose this path, and I must continue no matter how hard" (P2); "Silence is safer than facing their disappointment." (P10)	6
Lifestyle Interference and Restricted Autonomy	Freedom restriction, intrusive governance, infantilization	"They dictate my major, career plans, even life choices." (P3); "Endless rules: save money, no gaming, no dating—'for my own good." (P5); "I feel I've already grown up, but they still treat me like a child" (P7)	6

These conflicts systematically undermined the students' basic psychological needs: compressed autonomy through imposed expectations, emotional distancing through blocked communication, and impaired competence due to lifestyle micromanagement. The interaction among these unmet needs contributes to the failure of motivation internalization.

3.3.2 Systematic Suppression of Basic Psychological Needs and Impaired Motivation Internalization

Amid filial tension and intergenerational control, participants exhibited consistent impairment across three basic psychological needs—autonomy, relatedness, and competence. This systemic frustration directly obstructed core psychological processes: motivational internalization, self-regulation, and meaning construction.

3.3.2.1 Autonomy Frustration (7 participants)

Autonomy frustration manifested in three forms: **external constraints** (3participants), **decision dependency** (4 participants), and **internal suppression** (2participants). Details are presented in Table 3.5:

Table 3.5 Types and Manifestations of Autonomy Frustration

Types	**Keywords**	**Representative Statements**	**Number of Participants**
External Constraints	Institutional control, enforced compliance	"I want to focus on my major, but there are too many regulations—morning reading, evening study, rigid management. Many general education courses feel like a waste of time, but I have to comply" (P7);	3

		"From elementary to high school, we were forced to study. That pressure kept me moving. Now in college, with fewer constraints, I've become much lazier" (P2); "I fulfill tasks just because I have to, whether assigned by the school or my parents. It's not enjoyable" (P3)	
Decision Dependency	Following parents' advice, unclear future	"Chose finance to please parents—now struggling and unhappy." (P8); "They were pleased when I chose what they wanted. It felt like I was walking their path" (P10); "I'm still unsure about my future, so I mostly follow their suggestions" (P5)	4
Internal Suppression	Fear of disobedience, Guilt-driven inhibition	"I abandon personal aspirations to avoid 'disrespecting' parental sacrifices." (P1)	2

Note: Total >7 due to co-occurrence of types.

These results indicate that autonomy frustration is rarely caused by isolated incidents. Rather, it stems from a structural combination of long-term external control in education, parental dominance in decision-making, and institutional reinforcement within the educational system, which collectively inhibit the development of autonomous motivation.

3.3.2.2 Deficiency in Relatedness (8 participants)

Relatedness deficiency was primarily reflected in **fragile emotional bonds** (7 participants) and **conditional belonging** (4participants)(Table 3.6).

Table 3.6 Types and Manifestations of Relatedness Deficiency

Types	**Keywords**	**Representative Statements**	**Number of Participants**
Fragile Emotional Bonds	Lack of communication, generational gap, emotional concealment，lack of support	"We don't talk much; there's a generational gap" (P6); "They encourage and comfort me, and I feel guilty, so I lie and say I'm doing fine. But I'm terrified of getting caught" (P8); "We just avoid conflict. No arguments is the best we can manage" (P7)	7
Conditional Belonging	Acceptance based on performance, transactional recognition	"They only see me as considerate when I do housework; otherwise, they're generally not satisfied with me" (P1); "They used to argue with me all the time when I was younger. Now they've lowered their expectations, and the relationship has improved slightly" (P10)	4

Note: Total >8 due to co-occurrence of types.

The findings indicate that superficial peace in parent-child relationships often conceals deeper emotional estrangement. Students lack meaningful emotional bonds and support systems, weakening relatedness' motivational function.

3.3.2.3 Erosion of Competence (8 participants)

Competence frustration manifested in three subtypes: **ability denial** (7 participants), **achievement void** (5 participants), and **future helplessness** (4 participants). These outcomes reflect the chronic damage of a system characterized by high expectations and low feedback. Details are presented in Table 3.7:

Table 3.7 Types and Manifestations of Competence Frustration

Types	Keywords	Representative Statements	Number of Participants
Ability Deniale	Low self-efficacy, self-doubt	"I feel useless. I'm not good-looking, nor academically talented" (P6); "Poor test scores and unsatisfactory assignments make me doubt my abilities" (P8); "I disengage to avoid humiliation." (P9)	7
Achievement Void	Lacking positive feedback, reinforcement of failure	"Criticism from part-time jobs deepens my inadequacy." (P8); "I'm a virtual-world hero but a real-world failure" (P4)	5
Future Helplessness	Career anxiety, unclear goals	"I worry whether the high tuition will pay off. Did I make the right choice?" (P7); "The job market is so tough, I might not even survive financially" (P6); "I don't think I have the capability, and I'm confused about what I can do in the future" (P1)	4

Note: Total >8 due to co-occurrence of types.

Structurally, the impairments across the three basic psychological needs are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing, forming a clear negative feedback loop:

Lack of autonomy leads to passivity and prevents students from setting meaningful goals or deriving satisfaction from their efforts. Failure is often internalized as personal inadequacy, further undermining competence.

Deficiency in relatedness reduces emotional resilience and the ability to recover from setbacks. Without adequate relational support, students become more prone to self-doubt and avoidance.

Eroded competence diminishes exploratory motivation, leading students to rely more on others' decisions and further limiting their development of autonomy.

Clearly, these psychological needs do not deteriorate in isolation. Rather, under the specific cultural structure (e.g., parental authority, filial expectations), educational environment (e.g., standardized control), and intergenerational dynamics, they are systematically entangled, resulting in a compounded dysfunction of the self-regulatory system.

3.3.3 The Dilemma of Self-Acceptance

A significant number of interviewed college students (10/10) demonstrated notable difficulties with self-acceptance. This phenomenon should not be interpreted merely as an isolated psychological trait, but rather as a direct consequence of the long-term frustration of basic psychological needs. Specifically, relatedness deficiencies (8 /10) weakened their emotional validation (e.g., P1: "I am only recognized when doing housework"), while autonomy frustration (7/10) diminished their sense of self-determination (e.g., P8: "I don't dare to acknowledge my strengths"), jointly forming the psychological foundation of low self-acceptance.

3.3.3.1 Low Self-Acceptance (10/10)

Low self-acceptance was primarily expressed through three manifestations: **self-recrimination** (8 participants), **negatives self-fixation** (6 participants), and **inability to tolerate flaws** (5 participants). Several participants exhibited more than one pattern (e.g., P8). Details are presented in Table 3.8.

Table 3.8 Types and Expressions of Low Self-Acceptance

Types	Key Features	Representative Quotes	Number of Participants
Self-blame and internal conflict	Guilt, anxiety, comparison fatigue	"Constant self-doubt: Am I useless?" (P7); "Watching peers advance while I stagnate fills me with shame." (P8)	8
Negative Self-Fixation	Persistent negative self-evaluation, shame, harsh self-criticism	"I only see my shortcomings and fear others noticing them." (P9); "I call myself 'trash' after gaming." (P1)	6
Inability to Tolerating flaws	Denial of strengths,rejecting weaknesses	"Even my strengths feel like luck." (P8); "Acknowledging my weaknesses makes me feel incompetent in that area." (P10)	5

3.3.3.2 Other-Evaluation Sensitivity(8/10)

Other-evaluation sensitivity manifested as:**other-dependent identity** (5 participants), **societal standard anxiety** (2 participants), and **relational judgment avoidance** (6 participants)(See Table 9 for typology and exemplars) . This dimension reveals that low self-acceptance stems not only from familial influences but is profoundly amplified by sociocultural and peer pressures.

Table 3.9 Typology of Other-Evaluation Sensitivity

Types	Key Features	Representative Quotes	Number of Participants
Other-Dependent Identity	Emotional volatility, fragile autonomy	"I'm easily influenced by the opinions of close friends and family. Their comments often make me feel insecure, sad, or anxious." (P4); "I'm very sensitive to classmates' evaluations—it makes me feel inadequate." (P6)	5
Societal Standard Anxiety	Perfectionism, self-critical focus	"The perfectionism promoted by culture makes me overly critical of myself—I try desperately to hide my flaws." (P8); "Social norms and external evaluation shape my self-perception, causing me to fixate on weaknesses and ignore strengths." (P7)	2
Relational Judgment Avoidance	Social withdrawal, emotional concealment	"I'm afraid others will see me as weak, so I don't express myself easily." (P3); "I care too much about others' opinions. I can't handle the pressure and don't even want to go to school." (P9)	6

Note: Total >8 due to co-occurrence of types.

3.3.3.3 Transformational Acceptance(4/10)

A small number of participants (4) exhibited signs of **transformational acceptance**, categorized as: **growth-oriented coping** (1 participant), **selective internalization** (1 participant), and **imperfection acceptance** (2 participants). See Table 3.10 for details.

Table 3.10 Types and Expressions of Transformational Acceptance

Types	Key Features	Representative Quotes	Number of Participants
Growth-oriented coping	Self-improvement focus, goal-directed adaptation	"When facing negative evaluations, I focus on my own growth, set personal goals, and strive to achieve them." (P4)	1
Selective Internalization	Discerning evaluation, objective reflection	"I try to objectively assess the feedback—if it's valid, I change; if not, I let it go. Change isn't always easy." (P5)	1
Imperfect Acceptance	Acceptance of imperfection, reduced evaluation anxiety	"No one is perfect. Everyone has flaws. I no longer care too much about others' views." (P10); "As I've grown older, I've become more accepting of who I am and learned to go with the flow." (P3)	2

The lack of self-acceptance deprives individuals of adaptive buffering mechanisms when confronting failure, thereby perpetuating low-motivation states and diminished meaning in life. Despite attempts at self-growth or rational self-appraisal, most students fail to establish stable value anchors for sustainable psychological functioning.

More critically, low self-acceptance appeared to function as a **mediating variable that exacerbates psychological collapse**. Dependence on external evaluation (8 participants) undermined emotional resilience (e.g., P3: "When overwhelmed, I have no one to talk to"), while self-denial (10 participants) impeded goal internalization (e.g., P7: "I feel useless, so I've given up trying"), ultimately contributing to **regulatory failure and behavioral paralysis** when faced with adversity (see Table3.12 Behavioral Paralysis, 10 participants).

3.4 Structural Failure in Meaning Construction and Action Regulation

3.4.1 Disruption in the Construction of Life Meaning

Amid cultural motivational conflicts and weakened self-systems, participants articulated meaning goals yet demonstrated **critical integration deficits**: 60% (6/10) held conflicting values without clear prioritization or actionable objectives, resulting in structural disintegration of meaning systems—manifested as **coherence rupture, purposelessness, and existential depletion**, as shown in Table 3.11.

Table 3.11 Types of Meaning-in-Life Dilemmas

Types	Key Features	Representative Quotes	Number of Participants
Coherence Rupture	Hollow daily life, behavioral repetition, weak sense of existence, mechanical routine	"It feels like every day is just about getting by—classes, games, evening study, homework, and then repeat." (P1); "I don't know who I am or what I truly want. I don't even know what value my goals hold. I feel like I'm just following the crowd, unwillingly, but I can't find my own path." (P5)	3
Purposelessness	Existential confusion, motivational vacuum, blurred	"Life feels flat. I have no real interests. I don't know what kind of life is better." (P9); "Halfway through studying, I don't know how to move forward. I've been lost for a long time, and the things I do every day	7

	direction, poor self-awareness	seem meaningless." (P3); "I'm often confused, unsure of what I ultimately want. I feel like I'm constantly changing." (P2)	
Existential Depletion	Existential fatigue, value questioning, inner emptiness, doubt about life	"Life is about being controlled all the time. Just surviving is hard enough." (P7); "I often feel lost and confused. Even when I understand the meaning of life, I still feel lost." (P8); "Sometimes while studying, I suddenly think: Why am I doing this? Then my mind goes blank, and I feel powerless." (P10)	9

Note: Total >10 due to co-occurrence of types.

The interviewed college students consistently exhibited blurred goal orientation, impaired value integration, and existential emptiness in their sense of meaning in life. These findings reveal the core psychological manifestation of the so-called *"Emptiness Syndrome" (kongxinbing)*: a profound deficit in meaning perception coupled with disorienting value confusion. Such meaning crises constitute the final symptomatic manifestation of cultural-motivational conflicts (60% with unintegrated values) combined with dual impairment in basic psychological need and self-acceptance.

3.4.2 Dual Collapse of the Self-Regulatory System

3.4.2.1 Self-Regulation Difficulties

Against a backdrop of chronic autonomy suppression, identity instability, and ambiguous goal structures, participants universally exhibited systemic regulatory impairment (10/10). Three interconnected failure patterns emerged (see Table 3.12).

Table 3.12 Distribution and Expression of Self-Regulation Difficulties

Category	Key Features	Representative Quotes	Number of Participants
Motivational Conflict & Drive Depletion	Procrastination, low motivation, internal-external conflict	"I make plans but just don't feel like doing them—always finding excuses." (P10); "There are two voices in my head—one wants to study, the other wants to give up. The lazy one always wins." (P1)	9
Emotional Dysregulation & Stress Collapse	Emotional exhaustion, sadness, anxiety, collapse	"Sometimes I get so anxious I break down easily and cry a lot." (P3); "Emotion regulation is the hardest part. Long-term stress from studying and part-time jobs keeps me trapped in a low mood." (P8)	6
Behavioral Paralysis & Executive Dysfunction	Procrastination, disrupted plans, action breakdown, distraction	"I make good plans but can't follow through—everything gets derailed." (P5); "It's hard to break free from the phone." (P6); "The hardest thing is how to sustain long-term effort." (P4)	10

Note: Total >10 due to co-occurrence.

The three types of predicaments are causally interconnected, forming a vicious cycle of **'insufficient motivation – emotional downturn – action failure.'** This ultimately manifests in a chain reaction of efficiency breakdown, diminished self-control, and weakened self-evaluation. The threefold manifestations of regulatory difficulties can all be traced back to three structural factors: the absence of

motivational sources, the fragility of failure-regulation mechanisms, and the instability of self-identity. The failure of the regulatory system constitutes the behavioral outcome of disrupted psychological needs, identity mechanisms, and value construction.

3.4.2.2 Failure of Self-Regulatory Strategies

Against the backdrop of impaired basic psychological needs, barriers to self-acceptance, and a fragile meaning system, participants generally faced difficulties in self-regulation. Nevertheless, most respondents actively engaged in various forms of self-regulatory efforts. Their strategies can be categorized into four strategy types (See Table 3.13), often combining multiple approaches (e.g., P3):

Table 3.13 Types of Self-Regulatory Strategies and Representative Expressions

Strategy Types	Key Features	Representative Quotes	Number of Participants
Avoidant Regulation	Giving up, escapism, repression, emotional numbing	"After being criticized by the teacher, I got irritated and played games. Planned to play for an hour, ended up playing until 3 a.m." (P1); "When faced with difficult tasks, I just want to run away—often giving up entirely." (P5); "I can't compete, and I can't relax either. So I try to 'chill' and just stay calm." (P6)	7
Context-Dependent Regulation	Environment-driven, externally initiated, temporary motivation	"Only when I study in the library or with others can I get into the zone." (P3); "Since childhood, I've always needed external pressure to study. Without it, I just get lazy." (P2)	5
Negotiated-Autonomous Regulations	Rational communication, self-directed choices, goal adjustment	"I discussed my major with my parents, and they supported my decision." (P8); "When I procrastinate, I try to reframe things and take the first step." (P4); "I do my best to meet my parents' expectations, solve problems, and earn their trust." (P6); "Now that I'm an adult, both my family and I agree I should be independent and explore on my own." (P3)	9
Self-oppressive Regulation	Forced compliance, internal friction, efficiency depletion	"I force myself to finish the task before taking a break, but my efficiency keeps dropping—eventually I just feel like giving up." (P3) "When I procrastinate, I push myself hard to get things done, but it's exhausting and hard to sustain." (P5)	6

The findings indicate that **avoidant regulation** often lead to task accumulation and emotional backlog, as individuals cope through withdrawal or passive disengagement. **Context-dependent regulation** may enable short-term action, but their lack of intrinsic motivational support renders them unsustainable. **Self-**

oppressive regulation tends to trap individuals in a self-consuming cycle of **'low efficiency – failure – increased pressure – repeated failure.'**

The limitations of these regulation strategies reflect the underlying dysfunction of the self-regulatory system: **avoidant regulation** (7/10) reveal a depletion of emotional regulation resources, while **self-oppressive regulation** (6/10) highlight the absence of autonomous motivation.

Although **negotiated-autonomous regulations** were the most frequently attempted (9/10), reflecting participants' desire for independent decision-making and open communication, these strategies were often undermined by a general lack of intrinsic motivation and unclear long-term goals. As a result, they were difficult to sustain in practice and prone to collapse under setbacks or difficulties, often giving way to avoidance or other ineffective coping patterns.

3.5 Diverse Expressions of Intervention Needs and Realistic Expectations

In the interviews, all participating students expressed, to varying degrees, a concrete need for psychological support, particularly in the areas of motivation enhancement, emotional regulation, self-growth, and future planning. These intervention needs were marked by a high degree of individualization, diversity, and cultural sensitivity.

First, regarding the content of interventions, students showed a clear preference for modules that could "stimulate intrinsic motivation," "enhance psychological resilience," and "offer practical coping strategies." Approximately 20% of respondents explicitly stated that they hoped such activities could help them "develop self-discipline," "clarify future direction," and "sustain motivation." Others expressed a desire to acquire skills in "self-management," "positive stress coping," or methods for "clarifying goals and a sense of meaning."

Second, in terms of intervention format, students generally favored relaxed, interactive, and non-coercive forms of participation. They emphasized the importance of a "low-barrier, non-judgmental" atmosphere, opposing the traditional lecture-style, didactic approaches common in psychological education. Notably, as many as eight respondents (80%) explicitly rejected conventional "preachy" formats (codes: non-coercive, relaxed atmosphere, non-oppressive, rejection of didacticism), calling instead for approaches aligned with their preferred" 'de-authoritized' communication styles",such as gamified design or experiential activities. This resistance reflects a broader discomfort with hierarchical or filial-piety-based authority models. As one participant put it (P8): "I need equal dialogue, not guidance." These expectations call for culturally responsive interventions that dismantle authoritative structures even within their own format.

Third, regarding willingness to participate, the majority of students (6/10) expressed interest in joining such interventions. However, a significant minority (4/10) voiced hesitation or resistance. Their concerns included a reluctance to reveal personal feelings, emotional inhibition, fear of being labeled, and discomfort with group dynamics. This emphasis on psychological safety reflects a broader pattern of identity sensitivity and reliance on trust among youth in therapeutic or developmental settings.

In summary, college students currently demonstrate significant intervention needs in motivation activation, emotional support, and meaning integration. However, they also exhibit a high sensitivity to the form and cultural context of such interventions. The fact that 80% of respondents rejected didactic formats and demanded approaches aligned with de-authoritized communication (e.g., gamification) provides a clear directive for subsequent program design. Interventions should integrate the triadic pathways of "motivation–meaning–acceptance," not only to address students' immediate psychological difficulties but also to offer structured support for long-term development. Ultimately, these findings

point toward the need for a localized intervention system that is both culturally grounded and attuned to the psychological developmental stage of its target group.

This section underscores that effective interventions must go beyond merely responding to regulatory or meaning-related challenges. They must also be culturally attuned to students' expectations around space for expression, boundaries of identity, and the pacing of participation.

4 DISCUSSION

Based on in-depth interviews with first-year Chinese university students, this study focuses on core themes such as meaning in life, self-regulation, self-acceptance, and cultural motivation. It reveals a key psychological mechanism chain underlying their difficulties in receiving developmental support: **dual filial piety tesion—intergenerational conflict—psychological needs frustration—self-acceptance deficits—meaning disintegration—ineffective self-regulation**. This mechanism is deeply embedded in a relationally oriented cultural-psychological structure and constitutes a fundamental basis for developmental stagnation among college students. The following discussion integrates theoretical analysis and intervention implications across themes of cultural motivations, intergenerational dynamics, self-acceptance, meaning construction, and self-regulation ability.

4.1Cultural Motivational Tensions: The Divisive Impact of Dual Filial Piety on Motivational Structures

The findings indicate that a majority of respondents (8/10) simultaneously endorsed both authoritarian and reciprocal filial piety. However, this coexistence often manifested as deep internal tension and functional distortion. Reciprocal filial piety, while theoretically rooted in emotional connection (e.g., emotional support), frequently became instrumentalized into "guilt-driven reciprocation" in practice (e.g., obligation-based responses, 6 participants). Authoritarian filial piety, on the other hand, tended to dominate critical decision-making (such as academic major selection), with its motivational essence aligning with **introjected regulation** in Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000)—that is, individuals accepted external rules (e.g., "I chose the major my parents wanted because it's seen as a good job path" – P1) without integrating them into their self-concept. This led to significant frustration in autonomy (7 participants), accompanied by unclear goals, motivational fluctuations, and emotional suppression (e.g., "I chose my parents' preferred major, found it difficult to study, and lost interest" – P8), thereby forming a **high-expectation–low-motivation regulatory paradox** (Assor et al., 2009).

This structure echoes the **functional alienation model of dual filial piety** proposed by Yeh and Bedford (2003), which suggests that individuals often face introjection dilemmas between cultural demands and personal needs. SDT further posits that when introjected motivations fail to evolve into integrated regulation, individuals are likely to experience autonomy frustration, emotional repression, and motivational imbalance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Consequently, effective interventions should focus on the **transformative processing of filial piety motivations**: reducing the sense of obligation while enhancing emotional resonance. Authoritarian conformity should be gradually restructured from **passive compliance** to **autonomous integration**, thereby enabling culturally adaptive pathways for meaning-making and the restoration of self-regulatory capacity (Bedford & Yeh, 2019).

4.2 Mechanism of Intergenerational Conflict: A Systemic Pathway to Basic Psychological Need Frustration

The interviews revealed three prototypical forms of intergenerational conflict—**expectation mismatch**, **communication barriers**, and **interference in daily life**—which collectively formed a systemic

pathway frustrating the basic psychological needs. For instance, statements such as “My parents chose my major, and I just went along with it” (P3) reflect **autonomy deprivation**; “I only tell them good news, there's no point in saying more” (P1) points to **barriers in emotional expression** and the lack of relatedness support; while “They care about me but want to control everything” (P5) highlights **supportive control**, which ultimately diminishes the sense of competence (Chao & Tseng, 2002).

Such intergenerational dynamics not only fail to meet students’ psychological needs but also exacerbate a **controlling family climate**, thereby impairing the internalization of motivation and the integration of values (Ryan & Deci, 2000). More critically, these conflict mechanisms tend to reinforce each other, forming a **closed loop of high expectations–low autonomy–weak support–high pressure**, which continuously erodes individuals’ self-efficacy and confidence in self-regulation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

From an intervention perspective, the goal should not be merely to suppress intergenerational conflict, nor should it be to eliminate value differences. Rather, the task lies in **establishing a need–culture coordination framework**, transforming filial piety from a tool of control into a structure of support. By guiding students to shift from being controlled to actively leveraging familial resources, interventions can help achieve mutual gains and provide a culturally rooted, growth-enabling space for motivational systems (Ryan et al., 2021).

4.3 The Dilemma of Self-Acceptance: The Disruptive Mediation of Low-Containment Self-Structures on Regulatory Systems

This study found that **low self-acceptance** (reported by 10 participants), along with heightened **sensitivity to external evaluation** (8 participants), was widespread among interviewees. These traits appear to function as a **core mediating mechanism** linking cultural stressors—such as the conditional value logic embedded in authoritarian filial piety—with psychological symptoms including loss of meaning and regulatory failure. Specifically, authoritarian filial norms tend to reinforce a **conditional value system** (Bedford & Yeh, 2019), typified by beliefs such as “only those who obey or succeed are worthy of love” (e.g., “Only when I do housework am I recognized as useful” – P1). Meanwhile, the “obligationalization” of reciprocal filial piety further amplifies the fixation on demonstrable forms of reciprocation (Bedford, 2004).

Together, these dynamics lead individuals to tether their **self-worth to external approval**, resulting in heightened sensitivity to others’ evaluations (8 participants) and a diminished capacity for self-compassion or acceptance of personal shortcomings (5 participants). Many participants described falling into an exhausting internal cycle of “wanting to do well—failing—self-blame—giving up” (P8), a pattern consistent with the **emotional costs of introjected regulation** (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and the **undermining effect of contingent self-worth on resilience** (Assor et al., 2009).

In contrast to the overall trend of low self-acceptance, a smaller subset of participants (4 individuals) exhibited **emerging signs of what might be termed 'transformational acceptance'** (see Table 3.10). This state does not reflect fully developed self-acceptance, but rather suggests a more **resilient mode of self-relation**. For example, P5 described attempting to “view feedback objectively—change what can be changed, accept what cannot” (indicating selective internalization and autonomous evaluation); P4 emphasized “focusing on personal growth and setting one’s own goals” (a growth-oriented coping strategy); and both P3 and P10 expressed a maturing mindset of “going with the flow” and “reducing anxiety about others’ opinions,” indicating a form of **imperfect but evolving acceptance**. Although

these attitudes have not yet stabilized, they offer **valuable empirical insights into potential developmental pathways** for cultivating self-acceptance within the context of filial culture.

Theoretically, **self-acceptance serves as a mediating variable** between external cultural pressures and internal regulatory capacity. Neff (2003) proposed that **self-compassion**—through mechanisms of empathy, non-judgment, and recognition of common humanity—can buffer the emotional damage caused by failure. Similarly, Assor et al. (2009) argued that **contingent self-worth** weakens post-failure resilience, thereby undermining the structural robustness of the self-regulation system.

Accordingly, intervention efforts should not merely aim to raise abstract levels of self-acceptance, but rather **promote dynamic transitions toward transformational acceptance**. This involves integrating the concept of self-acceptance with the framework of **dual filial piety**: deconstructing external evaluation dependency through **cognitive defusion** techniques (Hayes et al., 2012), constructing **growth-oriented and dialectical reference systems**, and employing self-compassion strategies (Neff, 2003) to reframe **shame over inadequacy** as **shared human experience**. These approaches help to foster transformational acceptance as a **core regulatory mechanism**, enabling individuals to rebuild a tolerant attitude toward their own limitations, detach from identity structures shaped by external expectations, and shift from **conditional** to **intrinsic valuation**. Ultimately, this lays the foundation for developing **stable internal value anchors** (Leung, 2010), which in turn support **sustainable autonomous motivation** and **emotional recovery** pathways (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

4.4 Disintegration of Meaning Structures: From Value Incoherence to Action System Collapse

Although all participants (10/10) were able to articulate some form of life meaning orientation (see Table 3.3), the majority (6/10) simultaneously held **conflicting value pursuits** and lacked the ability for **internal integration**. As P5 expressed, "I want to stay close to my family, but I also want the freedom to do what I love," highlighting the psychological tension between **filial obligations** and **personal aspirations**, and the absence of a unifying internal framework to reconcile them. This form of **value construction failure** gave rise to three typical dilemmas: breakdown in **life coherence** (3 participants), **lack of clear goals** (7 participants), and **diminished sense of meaning** (9 participants), —aligning with Steger's (2012) **tripartite model of meaninglessness** (coherence, purpose, and significance).

More critically, the collapse of these value systems appeared closely tied to **familial control**, **externally regulated motivation**, and **conditional self-evaluation**. For instance, expressions such as "I'm just getting by" or "I don't know what I'm doing" (P1, P10) should not be misread as laziness, but rather reflect a **failure in meaning-driven agency** and a lack of **psychological embedding** (Baumeister, 1991). Therefore, effective intervention must follow a three-phase process: **clarification – internalization – anchoring**. First, *clarifying motivational sources* entails helping students recognize the filial underpinnings of their life goals, and gradually shifting from an externally controlled sense of "living for parents" toward an autonomous aim of "utilizing the family as a resource for personal growth" (Yeh, 2006). Second, *internalizing self-vision* involves the use of goal-generation interventions grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), enabling students to regulate according to intrinsic motivation and move from "who they want me to be" to "who I want to become" (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Chirkov et al., 2003). Third, by strengthening *self-acceptance* and *emotional regulation capacities*, students can maintain a sense of meaning, value, and agency even amid confusion or failure (Neff, 2003; Hayes et al., 2012).

This structured pathway addresses the **developmental crisis of existential confusion** among youth and offers a culturally grounded mechanism for psychological intervention design.

4.5 Self-Regulation Dilemmas: The Dual Structure of Motivation Deficit and Behavioral Breakdown

This study revealed the **pervasiveness of self-regulation difficulties** among participants (all 10 reported such issues), with diverse manifestations including **lack of motivation** (9 participants) and **execution impairments** (10 participants). These issues often formed a **self-defeating loop**: plan collapse → emotional reaction → self-blame and denial → procrastination or giving up. Although many participants attempted various regulatory strategies, they typically exhibited patterns of **ineffective imitation** or **short-term coping** (see Table 3.13). As P5 noted, "I force myself to finish tasks, but my efficiency just keeps dropping," illustrating the unsustainable nature of **pressure-driven regulation**.

These difficulties in regulation are not isolated occurrences but deeply rooted in **culturally shaped motivational impairments**. Under an upbringing dominated by **authoritarian filial piety** (Yeh & Bedford, 2003), students often completed tasks through a pattern of **passive compliance**, relying on punishment-based motivation or emotional suppression to initiate action (Bedford & Yeh, 2019). When confronted with **weakened external control** (e.g., the autonomy-rich university environment) and **unclear value goals** (e.g., unintegrated life meaning), these previously functional regulatory strategies break down, while new **intrinsic regulatory mechanisms** have yet to form. This explains the common refrain: "Without pressure I slack off," or "I can push myself but can't sustain it" (P2, P5).

This phenomenon echoes Zimmerman's (2000) model of **regulation failure**, in which failed attempts lead to **low efficacy expectations**, culminating in **regulatory energy depletion**. It also aligns with SDT findings that the **triple deprivation** of **autonomy**, **competence**, and **relatedness** significantly weakens behavioral motivation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Thus, interventions must aim to support self-regulation through **a multilayered system**:

At the **motivational level**, assist students in generating **sustainable, meaning-oriented goals** (Ryan & Deci, 2000);

At the **behavioral level**, construct a **repeatable and adaptable action framework** to ensure **long-term engagement** (Bandura, 2001);

At the **evaluative level**, enhance their capacity to **tolerate failure** and **bounce back from regulatory setbacks** (Neff, 2003).

Only when these three dimensions are systematically addressed can self-regulation evolve from **reactive imitation** to **stable intrinsic capacity**.

4.6 Cultural Logic of Intervention Expectations: Structural Presuppositions of Control Rejection and Participation Safety

The majority of students interviewed expressed a generally positive attitude toward receiving psychological support (6/10). However, a significant portion (8/10) explicitly rejected **didactic or prescriptive interventions**, emphasizing a strong preference for an atmosphere characterized by **lightness**, **non-oppression**, and **autonomous choice**. Their aversion to controlling intervention formats is essentially an expression of the psychological **need for autonomy**. In addition, some participants (4 participants) voiced concerns about **group-based activities**, as exemplified by P10: "I don't want to expose myself… I worry I'll feel uncomfortable in a group," reflecting a heightened **sensitivity to psychological safety**.

This preference for non-intrusive formats can be understood as a **reactive stance against past experiences of controlling cultural environments** (Chao & Tseng, 2002). It also reflects an avoidance of **exposure, failure, and labeling** in the context of **low self-acceptance** (Assor et al., 2009). This

underscores the need for interventions that go beyond content delivery and prioritize **structural safeguards** that protect identity, uphold participants' control over self-expression, and reinforce psychological boundaries. Only within such low-threat contexts can students begin to build trust. These findings support the central role of **self-acceptance** as a mediating mechanism in effective interventions (Neff, 2003; Assor et al., 2009).

Thus, intervention should not be conceptualized merely as the **provision of content**, but rather as the **reconstruction of participation mechanisms**. Intervention design must be guided by principles of **de-control**, **de-shaming**, and **structural support**. Effective responses to developmental needs must start not from "problem content" alone, but from the **logic of expression**. From the perspective of integrating **dual filial piety** with **self-acceptance mechanisms**, interventions must go beyond simply "solving problems"; they should also **empower students to engage in their growth autonomously and voluntarily**.

4.7 Integrated Mechanism Pathway: From Structural Problem Identification to Modular Intervention Design

This study uncovers the **underlying systemic structures** contributing to university students' developmental difficulties, revealing three layers of dysfunction:

Cultural motivational alienation: The internal tension within dual filial piety remains unresolved, leading to decision-making dominated by **introjected regulation** (e.g., in major selection).

Blocked basic psychological needs: Intergenerational control undermines **autonomy**, **relatedness**, and **competence**, eroding intrinsic motivational resources.

Fragile self-system: Students exhibit low self-acceptance, derive value from external approval, and lack the emotional resilience to accommodate failure or engage in self-support.

To address this progressive dilemma, the study proposes a four-phase intervention pathway centered on **relational reconstruction – motivational clarification – regulatory rebuilding – meaning integration**, each phase integrating relevant theoretical foundations and corresponding intervention tasks (see Table 14):

Table 4.1 Culturally Adapted Intervention Modules Based on the Three-Layer Structural Mechanism

Intervention Phase	Theoretical Integration	Core Task	Targeted Structural Dysfunction
Relational Reconstruction	DFPM (Reciprocal Filial Piety) + SDT (Relatedness)	Activate gratitude and emotional connection; restore intergenerational trust	Deficiency in relational needs
Motivational Clarification	SDT (Autonomous Motivation) + Filial Piety Transformation	Deconstruct authoritarian obligations; foster internalized motivation	Cultural motivational alienation
Regulatory Rebuilding	Self-Acceptance + Transformational Acceptance	Disrupt dependency on external evaluation; strengthen failure tolerance and emotional recovery	Fragility of self-system
Meaning Integration	SDT + Integrated Filial Identity + Self-Authorship	Simultaneously enhance sense of meaning in life and self-regulation ability; consolidate intrinsic value system	Lack of developmental integration

This pathway not only offers a **full-spectrum intervention mechanism** from motivational activation to behavioral sustainability, but also reinforces **cultural adaptability** by supporting the transformation of tensions between **filial identity and self-development**. In particular, the model uses **reciprocal filial piety** as the emotional entry point and **transformational self-acceptance** as the regulatory anchor, establishing **cultural-psychological grounding points** that run throughout the entire intervention process.

5. CONCLUSION

Grounded in the frameworks of **Dual Filial Piety Model (DFPM)**, **Self-Determination Theory (SDT)**, and **self-acceptance theory**, this study conducted a systematic needs analysis of the developmental challenges university students face in their **motivational**, **meaning**, and **regulatory** systems. The aim was to provide both a **mechanistic foundation** and **cultural insights** for the design of localized psychological intervention modules.

Findings indicate that the psychological struggles encountered by university students are not isolated emotional or behavioral disorders. Rather, they represent a **structural dilemma** arising from the interplay of **cultural value conflict**, **motivational dysregulation**, and **weakened self-system**. Specifically:

Under the tension of dual filial piety, students exhibit motivational patterns characterized by suppression stemming from authoritarian filial piety and guilt-based compliance. Reciprocal filial piety tends to be **obligated**, while authoritarian filial piety dominates critical decision-making, resulting in **introjected regulation** and a lack of autonomy.

High parental expectations and a "supportive control" parenting style undermine students' **basic psychological needs**—autonomy, relatedness, and competence—thereby creating a high-pressure yet inefficient motivational environment.

A **fragile self-system** marked by low self-acceptance and dependence on external evaluation weakens students' **regulatory resilience**, often leading them into a self-perpetuating cycle of **self-blame and withdrawal**.

Multiple, unintegrated life-meaning orientations produce fragmented goal systems and an unstable sense of direction. This fuels a downward spiral of **low motivation, emotional collapse**, and **executive dysfunction**, resulting in a behavioral manifestation of "**meaninglessness as anchorlessness, action as paralysis**."

Although students express a clear need for psychological support, they overwhelmingly reject didactic interventions and favor **non-controlling, non-judgmental** forms of assistance.

In sum, the developmental psychological difficulties of university students can be traced to a **disruptive mechanism chain**:

Cultural motivational alienation → Psychological need deprivation → Fragile self-system → Destabilized meaning structures → Regulatory failure.

This progression offers a precise target framework for developmental psychological interventions.

6. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study empirically validates the **core mechanism** by which **conflicts within dual filial piety (DFPM)** lead to systemic obstruction of **basic psychological needs (SDT)**, and it highlights the **mediating role of low self-acceptance** in this pathway. It thereby proposes an integrative theoretical model to explain the cultural-psychological underpinnings of what has been referred to as the "**Emptiness Syndrome**" among Chinese university students. Specifically:

The **Dual Filial Piety Model** is used to explain the **source and risks** of motivational conflict and the tendency toward **obligated reciprocity**;

Self-Determination Theory is applied to interpret motivational imbalance and the mechanisms by which basic psychological needs are undermined;

Self-acceptance is identified as a **key mediating factor**, facilitating motivational transformation, the restoration of meaning, and the rebuilding of regulatory capacity.

7. Practical Recommendations

Building on the identified mechanism chain, the development of intervention modules should follow a progressive path:

Start with relational reconstruction: Help individuals activate emotional connections within reciprocal filial piety, evoking memories of parental support and a sense of belonging, rather than reinforcing obligation-driven or control-based logic;

Use motivational clarification as the entry point: Deconstruct the **introjected obligation logic** within authoritarian filial piety, transforming filial piety from a control mechanism into a support structure. Assist students in discerning the boundaries between the "expected self" and the "authentic self," and promote a shift from external control to **integrated self-regulation**;

Position self-acceptance as a bridge: Focus on the development of **transformational acceptance**, guiding students to establish resilience toward failure and a stable **self-worth anchor**. By enhancing **self-compassion** and **emotional recovery**, the regulatory system can be effectively repaired;

Culturally adapt intervention formats: Interventions should adhere to principles of **non-authoritarianism**, **non-judgment**, and **low threat**. Methods such as **gamification**, **negotiation-based formats**, and **experiential learning** can reduce psychological defensiveness and enhance students' willingness to engage and express themselves.

This intervention pathway—centered on **relationship, motivation, regulation, and meaning**—directly addresses the structural dilemma outlined in this study. It offers university students a culturally grounded and individually paced **structured psychological support model**.

8. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. First, the **sample was relatively homogenous**, limiting the external generalizability of the findings. Second, the methodology relied primarily on **qualitative interviews**; future studies should incorporate **quantitative modeling** to validate and extend the proposed mechanism pathway. Third, this research focused on **needs analysis and theoretical modeling**, and has yet to enter the stage of **intervention tool development** or **empirical evaluation of effectiveness**.

Future research could explore the following directions:

Development of **modular intervention** based on the proposed mechanism model;

Empirical evaluation of interventions that integrate **self-acceptance and filial piety transformation** as mediating mechanisms;

Promotion of **localized intervention practices and structural optimization** within university psychological service systems.

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Interview Protocol for Needs Analysis

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to develop a culturally sensitive intervention module that combines dual filial piety and self-acceptance to enhance the sense of meaning in life and self-regulation ability among Chinese college students. Your participation will help us understand the current challenges and needs in these areas.

Confidentiality:

All responses will be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. Your identity will not be disclosed in any reports or publications resulting from this study.

Duration:

The interview will take approximately 30-60minutes.

Consent:

Do you consent to participate in this interview and allow us to record the session for accurate transcription and analysis?

Questions:

1. Meaning in Life (MIL)

Objective: To understand how college students perceive the meaning of life and the factors influencing their sense of meaning.

What is the most important thing in your life? How do you understand the meaning of life?

Have you ever experienced confusion about the meaning of life? Can you share your experience?

What has helped you find (or is helping you search for) meaning in life?

2. Self-Regulation Ability (SRA)

Objective: To explore how college students cope with stress, regulate their emotions, and manage self-discipline challenges.

How do you cope with stress or challenges?

What is your biggest challenge in time management, executing plans, or emotional regulation?

If there were a method to improve self-discipline and emotional management, what would you hope it to be like?

3. Dual-Filial Piety (DFP)

Objective: To examine students' understanding of filial piety and how they balance filial responsibilities with personal development in modern society.

How do you understand filial piety? How has it influenced your values?

How do you balance respect for your parents with personal independence in modern society?

Have you ever experienced conflicts between family expectations and personal aspirations? How did you handle them?

4. Self-Acceptance (SA)

Objective: To understand the level of self-acceptance among college students and how external factors influence their self-identity.

Do you find it easy to accept your strengths and weaknesses? Why?

How do you view yourself and regulate your emotions when facing failure or setbacks?

Have you ever felt negatively about yourself due to external evaluations? How did you cope with it?

5. Acceptance and Needs for Intervention Activities

Objective: To assess college students' acceptance of psychological intervention activities, their preferences, and needs, in order to optimize intervention module design.

Have you ever participated in mental health or personal growth activities? How was your experience?

Are you interested in psychological intervention activities? What format do you prefer?

If you were to design a psychological intervention activity, what theme do you think would be the most helpful?