

An Analysis of the Role of Universities in Constructing Independent Individuals against the Background of Traditional Family Deconstruction

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Abstract

With the in-depth transformation of Chinese society towards modernization, the traditional family structure, characterized by patriarchy as the core and family-centeredness, is undergoing profound deconstruction, showing prominent trends such as smaller family size, weakened intergenerational relationships, and externalization of family functions. While this transformation frees individuals from the constraints of traditional families, it also highlights problems such as lack of independence, confusion about values, and difficulties in social adaptation. Particularly in the perception of life meaning, individuals tend to fall into a "suspended" state. As a key transitional field for individuals moving from family to society, universities have been endowed with new connotations in the new era regarding their function of cultivating talents, against the backdrop of the weakened support system of traditional families. Based on Marx's theory of all-round human development and modernity theory, this paper combines empirical research and theoretical analysis to systematically explain the manifestations of traditional family deconstruction and its impacts on individual development, analyze the practical dilemmas faced by universities in constructing independent individuals, and focus on guiding the understanding of life meaning. It proposes a teaching reform path with philosophical education as the foundation, competence cultivation as the core, campus culture construction as the guarantee, and home-university collaboration as the support, aiming to provide theoretical reference and practical guidance for university talent cultivation in the new era.

Keywords: Deconstruction of Traditional Families; Independent Individuals; University Education for Talent Development; Educational Reform; Modernization Transformation; Perception of Life Meaning

1. Manifestations of the Deconstruction of Traditional Families and Its Profound Impacts on Individual Development

As the basic unit of Chinese social structure, the changes in the form and function of traditional families are an important epitome of social modernization. Understanding the core characteristics of this deconstruction process is a prerequisite for grasping the dilemmas of individual development and the mission of universities in talent cultivation.

1.1. Three-Dimensional Characteristics of Traditional Family Deconstruction

Traditional families are characterized by "the co-residential form of three generations living together", "patriarchal-dominated hierarchical order", and "integrated functions of production, life, and elderly care". The deconstruction trends in modern society are mainly reflected in the following aspects:

(1) Miniaturization of Form and Spatial Dispersion

Data from the National Bureau of Statistics shows that in 2023, the average household size in China was 2.62 people, a 40% decrease compared to 4.33 people in 1953. Nuclear families (couples + unmarried children) accounted for 68.7%, and "empty-nest families" and "single-living young people" have become common phenomena [4]. During the urbanization process, the cross-regional mobility rate of the post-80s and post-90s generations reached 72%. The spatial separation of family members has broken the traditional co-residential model of "living together day and night", reducing the frequency of daily intergenerational interactions by more than 60%, and weakening the practical foundation of traditional concepts such as "raising children for old age" and "family mutual assistance".

(2) Externalization of Functions and Differentiation of Responsibilities

Traditional families integrate multiple functions such as production, education, elderly care, and emotional support. In modern society, these functions have gradually been replaced by social institutions: the family production function of "men plowing and women weaving" in the agricultural society has been taken over by industrial enterprises; children's education has shifted from being dominated by "family precepts and clan rules" to being undertaken by the school system; the elderly care function has been shared by endowment insurance and social elderly care institutions; and emotional support has been partially diluted by social media. For example, the educational responsibilities of left-behind children in rural areas are shared by grandparents and schools, while young people in cities rely more on social security than their children for elderly care planning. The role of families as "all-round support systems" has been significantly weakened.

(3) Loosening of Ethics and Diversification of Values

Traditional family ethics centered on "filial piety" and "obedience", emphasizing the hierarchical order of "the father is the authority for the son, and the husband is the authority for the wife". Individual values had to submit to family interests, and the meaning of life was often tied to "family continuation" and "bringing honor to the family". With the infiltration of individualistic ideas, the younger generation pays more attention to the expression of personal will, and marriage autonomy, career freedom, and diverse lifestyles have become the norm. Data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2023 shows that the average age of first marriage in China has risen to 28.6 years, and "non-marriageism" and "late marriage and late childbearing" are accepted by more people. The binding force of the traditional family mission of "continuing the family line" on individuals has significantly decreased, and the original coordinate of life meaning has thus loosened [5].

1.2. Systematic Dilemmas Faced by Individual Development

While the deconstruction of families frees individual freedom, it also causes the breakdown of the traditional support system, putting individuals in multiple developmental dilemmas, among which the confusion in understanding the meaning of life is particularly prominent:

(1) "Intergenerational Gap" in Independence Cultivation

Traditional families cultivated individuals' sense of responsibility and survival skills through "division of labor between the old and the young" and "intergenerational demonstration" (such as skill inheritance in the agricultural era). However, in modern nuclear families, parents often overemphasize their children's academic performance while neglecting the cultivation of life skills. A survey shows that 72% of college students lack independent financial management skills, and 65% of students tend to avoid rather than actively solve setbacks. This "overgrown baby" tendency is directly related to overprotection from families and insufficient independent training [6]. Some students even cannot independently complete basic life tasks such as doing laundry and organizing their rooms after entering college. The lack of life skills further undermines their confidence in exploring the meaning of life—when individuals can hardly control the basic order of survival, it is more difficult for them to think about the in-depth question of "why to live".

(2) "Emotional Vacuum" in Emotional Support

Members of traditional families provided continuous emotional comfort through daily interactions, but the spatial separation of modern families and the intergenerational differences in values have weakened emotional support. Data from university psychological counseling shows that in 2023, the number of college students seeking help for depressive emotions increased by 210% compared to 2010, among which "loneliness" and "sense of meaninglessness" are the main causes [7]. This loneliness stems not only from physical separation (such as studying in a different place) but also from intergenerational communication barriers—a survey shows that 63% of college students say they "lack common topics with their parents" and find it difficult to obtain effective emotional resonance from their families [8]. The lack of emotional connection makes individuals lose their "reference frame" when exploring the meaning of life, making it difficult to confirm their own value through interactions with others, and thus falling into the confusion of "who am I and where am I going".

(3) "Suspended State" of Values and "Cognitive Blank" in Life Meaning

Traditional families provided individuals with clear value coordinates through family rules and clan precepts (such as "being diligent and thrifty in managing the family" and "being loyal and filial"), and the meaning of life was often closely linked to family responsibilities and family honor. However, modern society is characterized by diverse and conflicting values (such as the opposition between "lying flat" and "involution", and the collision between "individualism" and "collectivism"), making individuals prone to value confusion, which in turn leads to a cognitive blank in the meaning of life. A survey found that 68% of college students feel ambiguous about their "life goals", 43% of students prioritize "stability" over "interest" when choosing a career, which is rooted in the in-depth confusion of "not knowing what they really want"; moreover, 29% of students admit that they "have never seriously thought about the meaning of life" and only go with the flow in dealing with their studies and life [9]. Some students take "utilitarianism" as the dominant criterion for their behavior, equating "making money" and "getting a promotion" with "life success", but fall into greater emptiness after achieving these goals. This reflects that value choices lacking in-depth meaning support can hardly bring lasting spiritual satisfaction.

1.3. The Era Mission of University Education: Guiding the Independent Construction of Life Meaning

In the process of traditional family deconstruction in Western societies, religion served as an alternative link for individual connection, making the transition relatively smooth, and religious doctrines also provided individuals with an interpretive framework for the meaning of life. However, the deconstruction of traditional families in China has only taken 50 to 60 years, and has experienced drastic social changes, resulting in a huge cognitive gap between family generations and a lack of social organizations that can replace the functions of traditional families. Against this background, universities not only need to fill the gap in family functions and guide the construction of independent individuals but also assume the role of "enlighteners of life meaning"—helping students get rid of the cognitive confusion caused by the collapse of the traditional meaning framework and independently construct a life meaning system that is compatible with modern society and integrates personal value and social value.

The college years are a critical period for the formation of individuals' outlook on life and values. As a study points out, "for most people, college is their first step towards society, and their outlook on life and values are formed during college" [10]. If universities fail to guide students to clarify the meaning of life, individuals may fall into "youth without a place to belong", manifested in social barriers, value confusion, and even social confrontation; on the contrary, when individuals establish a clear cognitive understanding of the meaning of life, they will have stronger resilience and a sense of purpose, and explore an independent life more proactively. Therefore, integrating the guidance of life meaning into the university education system has become an urgent era task after the deconstruction of traditional families.

2. Theoretical Basis and Practical Challenges for Universities in Constructing Independent Individuals

The construction of independent individuals by universities is not a random choice but is based on a profound theoretical logic. At the same time, it also faces complex practical challenges in guiding the understanding of life meaning.

2.1. Theoretical Basis: Philosophical Logic from "Dependence" to "Independence" and Dialectical Reflection on Life Meaning

(1) Marx's Theory of All-Round Human Development: Meaning Lies in "Free and Conscious Activity"

Marx pointed out in *Das Kapital* that human development is the "full, free, and all-round development of physical strength and intelligence", which needs to break through the old division of labor and "the relationship of dependence between people"; the essence of human beings is "the sum of all social relations", and the meaning of life is not an isolated personal choice but is reflected in the process of participating in social labor and realizing social value [1]. The hierarchical order of traditional families is essentially a manifestation of "the relationship of dependence between people", and the meaning of individuals' lives is kidnapped by family will; however, the individual independence in modern society is a stage of "human independence based on dependence on things". Through knowledge imparting, practical training, and social interaction, universities help individuals get rid of the one-way dependence on families, explore the meaning of life in "free and conscious activities" (such as scientific research innovation and social services), and realize the "unity of personal value and social value", which is fully in line with the core essence of the theory of all-round human development.

(2) Giddens' Theory of Modern "Disembedding": Meaning Originates from "Reflexive Choice"

Giddens proposed that the core of modernity is "individual disembedding"—individuals are liberated from the fixed relationships of traditional communities and construct self-identity through reflexive choices [2]. In this process, the meaning of life is no longer "given" (such as the responsibilities assigned by traditional families) but "constructed": individuals need to critically screen among diverse values, combine their own interests, abilities, and social needs, and form an independent cognitive understanding of meaning. As a product of modernity, the educational process of universities is essentially a process of re-socialization after "disembedding": by providing diverse knowledge and values, it guides students to critically reflect on the conflicts between the "traditional meaning framework" and "modern life needs" (such as the modern connotation of "filial piety" and the diverse definitions of "success"), helping students determine the core direction of life meaning through reflection.

(3) Existentialist Philosophy: Meaning Lies in "Active Creation"

Sartre proposed that "existence precedes essence"—individuals have no preset essence, and the meaning of life needs to be created through their own choices and actions [3]. This theory provides important enlightenment for universities to guide the cognitive understanding of life meaning: in the face of the collapse of the traditional meaning framework, universities should not directly "instill" standard answers to the meaning of life, but should cultivate students' ability to "actively create meaning"—by encouraging exploration and tolerating trial and error, allowing students to experience "satisfaction from dedication" and "value from creation" in practice, and thus independently develop their understanding of the meaning of life. For example, when students participate in rural education support, the emotional resonance obtained by helping others may make them incorporate "serving society" into the core of life meaning; in scientific research, the sense of accomplishment obtained by solving difficult problems may make them take "promoting scientific and technological progress" as their life goal.

2.2. Practical Manifestations of Individual Independence in the University Field: Deviations and Dilemmas in the Cognition of Life Meaning

After the deconstruction of families, the exploration of individual independence presents a complex form in the university field, including both positive attempts and negative tendencies, behind which there are often deviations in the cognition of life meaning:

(1) "Heads-Down Tribe": Replacement of Real Relationships by Virtual Social Interaction—"Virtual Projection" of Meaning

"Loneliness" is a complex feeling brought about by individual independence: on the one hand, young people gain narcissistic satisfaction through the self-perception of "being detached from the world"; on the other hand, the "social needs" in Maslow's hierarchy of needs make them eager for connection. This contradiction makes the phenomenon of "heads-down tribe" prevalent on college campuses—students obtain immediate sense of belonging through online links such as Moments, games, and live broadcasts, which not only meet their social needs but also maintain a "lonely" posture in reality. More notably, some students equate "recognition in the virtual world" (such as the number of likes and game levels) with "life value", projecting the meaning of life into virtual scenarios and ignoring the creation of meaning in reality. This cognitive deviation leads to "the hollowing out of the sense of meaning": the satisfaction in the virtual world is fleeting, and once individuals are disconnected from the Internet, they will fall into a deeper sense of meaninglessness.

(2) "Lying Flat": Passive Resistance of Individuals to Social Pressure—"Active Abandonment" of Meaning

"lying flat" seems to be similar to Yan Hui's "contentment with poverty and joy in virtue", but in fact, it is a compromise and abandonment in the face of social pressure, essentially a "passive avoidance" in the cognition of life meaning: in the face of "involution" pressure and value confusion, some students choose to "give up pursuing meaning", cope with life with "not working hard and not expecting", and try to avoid the pain caused by the lack of meaning by "reducing desires". The manifestations of "lying flat" in universities include low class participation, evasion of social practice, indulgence in the virtual world, and even abandonment of the pursuit of ideals and truth. A survey shows that 38% of students admit that they "lack planning for the future and passively cope with their studies", which is rooted in the in-depth confusion of "not knowing what the meaning of hard work is"—when individuals cannot confirm "what value hard work can bring", they will choose to "lie flat" to reduce mental internal friction [9].

(3) "Nezha-Style" Exploration: Limitations of Individual Heroism—"Self-Enclosure" of Meaning

The popularity of the movie *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* reflects individuals' exploration of independent identity: the narrative of "becoming a hero even if not recognized" is a typical expression of individual heroism. Although this tendency reflects the awakening of individuals' sense of independence, it also has limitations in the cognition of life meaning—it separates "personal success" from "social contribution", overemphasizes "self-realization" while ignoring "connection with others". Some students equate the meaning of life with "personal achievements" (such as making a lot of money and becoming an official), believing that "as long as they live well, life is meaningful". This cognition easily leads to "self-enclosure of meaning": after achieving personal goals, individuals quickly fall into a "meaning crisis" due to the lack of social connection and in-depth value support. As pointed out in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, individualism is characterized by "exaggerating the role of individuals and belittling the collective wisdom of the people", which is contrary to the university's goal of cultivating "social responsibility" and is not conducive to individuals constructing a lasting meaning of life [11].

2.3. Practical Challenges of University Education: Absence and Obstacles in Guiding Life Meaning

Universities face multiple obstacles in constructing independent individuals, especially in guiding the understanding of life meaning:

(1) Path Dependence of Traditional Education Models: Neglecting the Cultivation of Meaning Cognition

Some universities still retain the thinking of "exam-oriented education": theoretical courses account for 75% of the curriculum, focusing on professional knowledge imparting, while lacking courses such as "philosophy of life" and "value exploration"; "innovation and entrepreneurship courses" adopt large-class teaching mode without practical operation links, and the student participation rate is only 32% [12]. This model not only makes it difficult to cultivate students' independent thinking and practical abilities but also neglects the guidance of life meaning cognition—students passively accept knowledge in "cramming" education but are never guided to think about "the meaning of learning", "the value of majors", and "the direction of life". At the same time, "paternalistic management" implicitly restricts individual autonomy—45% of students believe that "the university manages too strictly and lacks independent space". Practices such as strictly restricting work and rest and excessively interfering in club activities easily make students form the habit of "passive obedience" and lose the motivation to actively explore the meaning of life [13].

(2) Absence of Home-University Collaboration Mechanism: "Goal Misalignment" in Meaning Guidance

The communication between universities and families mainly focuses on the criticism and feedback of "problem students", lacking systematic collaboration on individual development, especially "goal misalignment" in guiding life meaning: families often define the meaning of life from a "utilitarian perspective", emphasizing "stable employment" and "material success", and regard "taking the civil service exam" and "joining large enterprises" as the "optimal choice" for their children; while universities advocate "innovative exploration" and "social contribution", encouraging students to pursue their interests and ideals. This contradiction puts students in a dilemma: if they follow their families, they may give up the fields they truly love, leading to "doing things they don't like and feeling that life is meaningless"; if they insist on themselves, they may face pressure and doubt from their families, shaking their cognition of the meaning of life. More notably, when students conflict with their families on issues related to life meaning such as marriage and career choices, universities lack effective mediation mechanisms, and some students give up their independent choices due to family pressure, hindering the formation of an independent meaning system.

(3) Cognitive Dilemmas in the Digital Age: Fragmented Information Weakens the Depth of Meaning Reflection

The fragmented information brought by the Internet has made some students fall into "information dependence": 68% of students "directly copy online views" when writing papers, and 52% "follow the trend to express their opinions" when facing controversial topics. This "suspended cognition" weakens critical thinking abilities [14]. In terms of the cognition of life meaning, the negative impact of fragmented information is more significant: the Internet is full of extreme views such as "must succeed before the age of 30" and "lying flat is the true meaning of life". Students lack in-depth thinking abilities and are easily influenced by a single view, making it difficult to form an independent cognitive understanding of meaning. At the same time, virtual communication replaces real social interaction—62% of students say they "are more accustomed to online chatting and are afraid of face-to-face communication". However, the exploration of the meaning of life needs to be completed in real social interactions (such as experiencing value through cooperation and dedication). The prevalence of virtual communication greatly reduces the effect of universities guiding meaning cognition through clubs and practical activities [15].

3. The Path of Teaching Reform for Universities to Construct Independent Individuals: Strengthening the Independent Guidance of Life Meaning

In response to the development needs of individuals after the deconstruction of traditional families, universities need to comprehensively innovate their education systems from concepts to practices, especially integrating the guidance of life meaning into a four-in-one support system of "cognition-competence-emotion-system", helping students independently construct a meaning system that integrates personal value and social value.

3.1. Returning to Philosophical Education to Consolidate the Foundation of Independent Cognition: Guiding "In-Depth Reflection" on Meaning

The construction of independent individuals needs to take philosophical education as the foundation, and the cognition of life meaning is the core topic of philosophical education. Universities need to guide

students to think about ultimate issues such as "the meaning of life" and "value choices" through systematic philosophical education, and cultivate their in-depth reflection abilities:

(1) Reconstructing the Philosophical Curriculum System: Adding Courses on Meaning Exploration

Offer general education courses such as *Introduction to Philosophy*, *Ethics*, *Philosophy of Life*, and *Existence and Meaning*, with the cognition of life meaning as the core teaching goal. The curriculum design should avoid "abstract theoretical teaching" and adopt a "case discussion + problem-oriented" model: for example, by analyzing "Zhang Guimei's life choice of establishing a girls' high school" and "the meaning of Yuan Longping's lifelong dedication to hybrid rice", guide students to think about "the intersection of personal interests and social needs"; by analyzing the dialectical relationship between "lying flat" and "striving", and between "utilitarian pursuit" and "spiritual satisfaction", help students avoid extremism in value judgment and understand the diverse possibilities of life meaning. At the same time, integrate philosophical thinking into professional courses—for example, when teaching "medical ethics" in medical majors, discuss "the meaning of saving lives and healing the wounded"; when teaching "technological innovation" in engineering majors, analyze "the relationship between technology for good and human well-being", making professional learning a carrier for meaning exploration rather than mere knowledge accumulation.

(2) Innovating Teaching Methods: From "Instillation" to "Enlightenment"

Adopt interactive teaching methods such as "Socratic dialogue", "group debate", and "life narrative sharing" to encourage students to actively express their confusion and thoughts about the meaning of life. For example, organize a theme sharing session of "My Life Keywords", allowing students to extract their core value pursuits by telling their growth experiences; carry out a scenario discussion of "if life were only one year left", guiding students to face ultimate issues and clarify their life priorities. At the same time, invite practitioners from different fields (such as public welfare workers, scientific researchers, and grass-roots cadres) to enter the classroom and share their experiences in exploring the meaning of life—breaking the single cognition of "success = material prosperity" through real cases, allowing students to see the practical possibility of "diverse meanings", and stimulating their motivation for independent exploration.

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