Unraveling University Students' Socio-Psychological Needs in Chinese Cultural Context: Grounded in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Xuanwei Cui
Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics

Article Info

ABSTRACT

Abraham Maslow, a pioneer and founder of humanistic psychology, put forward Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which comprises five stages: Physiological Needs, Needs for Safety, Needs for Love and Social belongings, Needs for Respect, and Needs for Self-Actualization. Hierarchy is one of the noteworthy features of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Given the cultural context of Chinese universities where students are inherently influenced by Confucianism and collectivist national culture, attending to their needs at each of the five stages is instrumental for their success in life. To better tackle the psychological issues that students from universities may have, leaders at universities need to establish organizational policies and provide efficient counseling services to students from universities in China.

Corresponding Author:

Name: Xuanwei Cui
Institution: Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics
Email: aky_hd@outlook.com

1. INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 20th century, academic research in humanistic psychology began gaining momentum [15]. Abraham Maslow, a pioneer of humanistic psychology, argued that traditional psychology had gone astray because it treated humans as mere machines in a way akin to "the extension and practical application of the mechanical concepts of physics" to the psychological field [3]. According to Maslow, humans are not machines but sentient beings with intrinsic worth and dignity whose highest motivation for progress is the need to achieve self-actualization [3]. From a cultural perspective, Chinese university students are affected by Confucianism and collective national culture;

therefore, meeting their needs at each of the five stages proposed by Maslow is essential to their success [3].

The current study aims to examine the needs of contemporary students from universities in China by applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs [3]. The current study comprises four aspects: an introduction, Maslow and his humanistic psychology, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and an analysis of the needs of students from universities in China according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The contribution of this study is twofold. First, the current study analyses the needs of students at Chinese universities from the perspective of Confucianism and collectivist culture. Second, the current study introduces Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to

the realm of higher education management in China, which not only enriches the theories about social psychology in higher education but also provides a practical guidance system for higher education management in China.

2. ABRAHAM MASLOW AND HIS HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

Abraham Maslow, the author of the Theory of Human Motivation, was an educator, psychologist, and one of the founders of humanistic psychology [6]. Maslow was born in 1908 in New York in a working-class Jewish immigrant family [21]. Maslow received a bachelor's degree in psychology, a master's degree in psychology in 1930, and a doctorate in psychology from the University of Wisconsin in 1934 [6].

The rise of a better thinker is inextricably linked to their life experiences, and Maslow is no exception. Maslow has a businessman father and a religiously fanatical mother who shaped his upbringing by encouraging him to excel in education [21]. Especially when Maslow was traumatized by anti-Semitism and felt isolated and depressed [21], he became more involved in reading and became interested in studying. With his father's encouragement, Maslow pursued a career in law before pursuing a career in psychology, focusing on studying human attitudes and behavior [21].

The exploration of human psychology and behavior goes back to the ancient Greeks. To better understand the nature of the universe and speculate on how it came to be, ancient philosophy began with a careful study of the natural world [18]. For example, according to Greek philosophy, there is a philosophical worldview that holds that the main components of the universe are Earth, air, fire, and water [13]. It was not until after the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates put forward the idea of Know Yourself, which suggested that the opportunity for pursuing self-discovery, wisdom, and liberation is all possible if individuals know themselves as embodied souls [23], humankind was brought into the spotlight of the philosophical thought. However, the study of human self-awareness has always been the task of philosophers. For example, until 1875, psychology was still a collaborative project of philosophers, physicists, and biologists [20]. It was not until Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig in Germany and William James at Harvard in the United States founded two first psychology laboratories in 1879 simultaneously that psychologists rather than philosophers began investigating the nature of humans' self-awareness [20].

Maslow's most significant contributions to the study of psychology lie in being a founder of humanistic psychology. Before Maslow conducted his foundational research on human motivation, there were two powerful forces of psychology: behaviorism and psychoanalysis [21]. Behaviorism refers to the scientific study that "reduces all psychology to a study of movements of limb and muscle or gland, more particularly movements of the body as a whole" [1]. Psychoanalysis is a collection of psychological theories and therapeutic approaches derived from Sigmund Freud's work and ideas [19]. However, according to Maslow, because the psychoanalytic view was concerned with the examination of the unconscious conflicts and desires of mentally ill patients, and because the behavioral theory is concerned with the role of learning in animals rather than humans, neither behaviorism nor psychoanalysis was able to effectively explain the unconscious motivations and perceptions of a human being [17], [21].

Compared with behaviorism and psychoanalysis [21], "the humanistic movement in psychology has emphasized the search for a philosophical and scientific understanding of human existence that does justice to the highest reaches of human achievement and potential" [17]. Sigmund Freud's psychodynamic theories and John Broadus Watson's behavioral psychology influenced Maslow's study of humanistic psychology. Additionally, Maslow benefited from the mentorship of a diverse group of notable psychologists, such as Alfred Adler,

Ruth Benedict, and Max Wertheimer, as he developed his theory of human motivation [21]. Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a starting point [7], researchers and practitioners have discovered new ways of explaining human behavior. The significance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be seen in its being extensively used in studies outside of psychology [21].

3. MASLOW'S HIERACHY OF NEEDS

Hierarchy is one of the significant features of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs [7]. Specifically, Maslow established an order similar to a pyramid with five stages: Physiological Needs, Needs for Safety, Needs for Love and Social belongings, Needs for Respect, and Needs for Self-Actualization [7]. As a starting point for motivation theory, "Physiological Needs" are often referred to as "physiological drivers" [7]. Once the "Physiological Needs" are met, other needs arise, such as "Needs for Safety." As far as "Safety Needs" are concerned, preventing injury and ensuring a person's survival are the most prominent and primary goals. Meeting safety needs can bring individuals many benefits, including job security, savings, social security, and peace [7].

After "Physiological Needs" and "Safety Needs" are met, humans tend to seek the company of others. This is because the "Needs for Love and Social Belongings" will arise [7]. From this perspective, respect, self-esteem, and the need to respect others are basic human needs that everyone in society seeks and strives to achieve [7]. Meeting the "Needs for Respect" can help individuals believe in their worth and values, thereby increasing their confidence, creativity, and performance [2], [9]-[10].

However, even if all these needs are met, psychological dissatisfaction can still arise unless individuals are willing to do what they are called to and what is best suited for them in life. This is because individuals have enormous potential, and if their potential is tapped, they can reach new heights in their lives [8]. In this case, "Needs for Self-

Actualization", which is a term that refers to "the desire for self-fulfillment, more precisely, the tendency for them to become actualized in what is potential" [7], will arise.

According to Maslow, "Physiological Needs", "Security Needs", Needs for Love and Social belongings", "Needs for Respect", and "Needs for Self-Actualization" fall into two broad categories: needs at the lower level and needs at the higher level [4]. Low-level needs refer to basic needs, such as "Physiological Needs" and "Safety Needs," while high-level needs refer to those that encourage an individual to move forward and progress in life, such as "Needs for Respect" and "Needs for Self-Actualization." Fulfilling the five needs is a steady progression from meeting lower-level needs to meeting higher-level needs. In other words, basic needs should be addressed before higher needs are met and satisfied [7]).

While acknowledging the importance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs [7], the academic community has also put forward various criticisms aimed at Maslow's theory. For example, first, given that the organizational cultures of Western and Asian societies are characterized by individualism and collectivism, respectively [12], some scholars argued that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was developed based on "Western" individualism rather than the more collectivist social culture found in Asian societies [5], [7]. Second, the theory of the hierarchy of needs proposed by Maslow has also been criticized by postmodernists for emphasizing human agency [7]. Pearson and Podesky argued that "human agency as truth is an illusion because, in the regime of truth that creates the modern era, all we have are endless interpretations rather than truth" [14]. Thus, according to the postmodernists, the self-assumption in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was abandoned [14]. Although there have been various criticisms of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it is generally believed that the positive impact of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs outweighs its negative impact [7]. In particular, considering the critical role of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in explaining individuals' enthusiasm for

work, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs serves as a human-oriented incentive theory.

4. CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' NEEDS FROM THE PERSPECTIE OF MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

4.1 Physiological Needs

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Chinese university students' "Physiological Needs" should be satisfied. "Physiological Needs" are related to the concept of homeostasis [7]. Homeostasis refers to physiological indicators that regulate the human body's normal response, such as the number of biochemical substances in the human body [7]. In this regard, "Physiological Needs" are Chinese university students' most basic survival needs. Chinese university students will no doubt struggle if their physical needs are not met. Therefore, the "Physiological Needs" of Chinese university students must be met, such as the need for nutritious food and a decent living environment; otherwise, the study and life of Chinese university students will undoubtedly be negatively affected and disturbed. In other words, educators need to free Chinese students from the dominance of physiological needs and enable Chinese university students to pursue more socially beneficial goals [4].

4.2 Safety Needs

When Chinese university students' "Physiological Needs" are satisfied, their desire for safety will arise. Maslow believes that the human body is an organism and a safety-seeking machine, and "the receptors, the effectors, of the intellect and the other capacities" are mainly tools to seek safety [7]. In other words, according to Maslow, safety is understood as the degree to which students from universities in China feel protected by the institutions, the degree to which students of universities from China are free from emotional anxieties, and the degree of Chinese university student's perception of learning and life order [4]. If "Safety Needs" are not met, Chinese university students' daily lives and academic pursuits will be seriously disrupted. In this regard, it is the responsibility of educators to meet the safety needs of Chinese university students.

4.3 Needs for Love and Social Belonging

The "Needs for Love and Social Belonging" refers to a person's desire to be emotionally accepted by family and friends. Psychopathology theorists argue that failure to meet contemporary society's needs for love and social belonging is a central cause of "maladjustment and more severe psychopathology" [7]. As for Chinese university students, because many of them leave their hometowns to study in a new environment, many faces varying degrees of pressure and need extensive psychological adaptation. For example, faced with adjustments, such as a completely different way of living and learning, a new campus, students from different places, and sharing study and living space with others, university students tend to feel anxious and uneasy in the new environment. As a result, they have a strong need for love and social belonging.

In particular, because collectivism plays a significant role in Chinese culture, compared to their Western counterparts who emphasize individualism, Chinese university students put more emphasis on the importance of love and social belonging. According to Livermore, a collectivist national culture in which strong social cohesiveness is a notable aspect of society not only affects China but also other Asian countries, such as Japan and Korea [12]. Countries under the influence of

collective national cultures place a high value on each person's social role and obligation to the community, as well as on interpersonal collaboration and the preservation of social harmony [11]-[12]. For example, in Chinese family education, children are cultivated by their elders to have traditional family values such as respecting elders and getting along well with neighbors. It may be argued that collectivism has had a significant impact on Chinese society's traditional culture in addition to individual values and interpersonal communication styles. As far as Chinese college students are concerned, they would prioritize teamwork and harmonious cohabitation with other students and have strong emotional ties to their universities. As a consequence, compared to their Western counterparts who place greater value on individualism, Chinese university students are likely to place a higher value on the desire for love and a sense of social belonging. In this regard, universities also need to actively organize networking activities for university students to build friendships and connections with their schoolmates and their university educators.

4.4 Needs for Respect

When it comes to the "Need for Respect", according to Maslow, there are two subsets of the need for respect: the Desire for Strength, Achievement, for Adequacy, Confidence, and Freedom" [7] and "the Desire for Reputation or Prestige, Recognition, Attention, Importance of Appreciation" [7]. Maslow believes that once Chinese university students' physiological needs, safety needs, love needs, and social belonging are met, the need for respect will emerge [7]. From a psychological point of view, Chinese university students need to develop

qualities, such as self-confidence and self-worth actively, and prove their worth by being recognized, appreciated, and supported by others. This is because individuals desire respect and admiration from others and a favorable evaluation of themselves based on a solid sense of self-worth and self-esteem [7]. Therefore, when the "Needs for respect" are unmet, Chinese university students may feel more secure about their value, worth, and dignity in society. In this regard, meeting the "Needs of Respect" of Chinese university students is a critical step educators must take.

Especially driven by Confucianism's emphasis on morality, ethics, and genuine treatment of others, Chinese university students place a premium on the "need for respect". Confucianism, founded in the fifth century BC by the Chinese philosopher Confucius [24], is not only the most prominent school of thought in China that became the foundation and symbol of Chinese traditional culture but also has a deep impact on East Asian culture [11]. Five values central to the Confucian thoughts are of particular interest to Chinese society: ren (benevolence), yi (maintaining righteousness), li (ritual norms), zhi (to be able to judge what is right and just), and xin (trust and honesty in dealing with others) [11], [24]. Nowadays these Confucian thoughts continue to affect the attitudes and behaviors of Chinese university students. For example, because Confucianism promotes yi (maintaining righteousness), Chinese college students are inspired to examine the moral ideals of justice and impartiality in what they do. Moreover, because Confucianism promotes li (ritual norms), Chinese university students are inspired to adhere to particular etiquette norms

in social communication and pay attention to respect for social rules and order. Given that Confucianism stresses the significance of cultivating oneself to develop oneself in a society [11], leaders at Chinese universities must acknowledge that they must address the "need for respect" of Chinese university students.

4.5 *Needs for Self-Actualization*

Compared with "Physiological Needs", "Needs for Safety", "Needs for Love and Social Belongings", and "Needs for Respect", "Needs for Self-Actualization" is the most urgent needs of Chinese university students. From the perspective of the need for self-actualization, individuals aspire to realize their full potential and fully realize their identity [7]. Self-actualization as human potential, for example, is a hypothetical theory that suggests that if Chinese university students' basic needs are met, they will be motivated by a higher degree of motivation to excel in their lives [22]. Therefore, Chinese university students are eager to use their existing abilities in their lives while maximizing their potential skills.

5. CONCLUSION

It is important to note that if these five needs of Chinese university students are not met, they will likely face psychological problems and crises. To tackle these problems, at the policy level, universities especially need to establish a set of reliable managerial policies to quickly deal with and prevent the psychological crisis of university students. At the executive level, universities should improve on-campus psychological counseling infrastructure, including establishing psychological development counseling centers, to provide dedicated mental health education and counseling services for university students whose needs are unmet. In this way, universities not only need to effectively deal with the psychological problems that university students may face but also try to prevent the emergence and development of psychological problems in university students from the beginning [16].

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