

Analysis and coping with the psychological dilemma of China's post-90s from the perspective of Russell's happiness view

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Abstract

Bertrand Russell's "decentralized" happiness theory, constructed in *The Conquest of Happiness*, provides a unique perspective on the psychological dilemma of contemporary China's post-90 generation. As the "sandwich generation" in a period of social transformation, the post-90 generation faces multiple psychological challenges such as workplace involution, peer pressure, alienation of close relationships, and loss of self-worth. Its core dilemma is highly compatible with the "self-incarceration," "social alienation," and "physical and mental depletion" criticized by Russell. This paper combines the research data of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the National Health Commission and other authoritative institutions to systematically dissect the inherent correlation between Russell's view of happiness and the psychological distress of the post-90 generation from a psychological perspective: on the one hand, verify the specific manifestation of Russell's diagnosis of the "root causes of unhappiness" in the post-90 population; On the other hand, based on Russell's "path to happiness realization," combined with the characteristics of the post-1990 era, It proposes targeted response strategies from the three dimensions of individual psychological regulation, relational reconstruction and social environment optimization, thereby providing theoretical guidance and practical pathways for alleviating the post-1990 happiness crisis and building a happiness support system appropriate to the local context.

Keywords: Russell's view of happiness; post-90s generation; psychological dilemma; social comparison; physical and mental exhaustion; decentralization

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background: Psychological Dilemmas and the Socio-historical Context of Post-1990s China

China's post-90s generation (born between 1990 and 1999) are both experiencers and bearers of social transformation. They grew up under the one-child policy and witnessed the rapid rise of the internet. As adults, they face structural pressures such as soaring housing prices, intensified workplace competition, and shifting attitudes toward marriage, making them a high-risk group for mental health problems.

According to the National Health Commission's Report on the Mental Health of Chinese Residents (National Health Commission, 2024), 38.6% of young people aged 18–34 experience varying degrees of anxiety, and 24.5% suffer from depression, with 62.3% of them born in the 1990s. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Post-90s Youth Development Report (China Academy of Social Sciences, 2023) further indicates that psychological distress among the post-90s population is concentrated in four areas: workplace anxiety (71.2%), peer pressure (68.5%), barriers in intimate relationships (59.8%), and a diminished sense of self-worth (56.4%).

This dilemma essentially reflects an imbalance in individual psychological adaptation amid a rapidly changing society. The post-90s are constrained by traditional success criteria—such as "starting a family"

and “maintaining stability and respectability”—while simultaneously surrounded by the “perfect illusion” of the digital age, represented by the “ideal life” showcased on social media. Their mental state oscillates between the extremes of “involution” and “lying flat,” demonstrating a trans-epochal resemblance to the spiritual crisis of industrial society that Bertrand Russell identified in the early twentieth century.

Therefore, employing Russell’s view of happiness as a theoretical framework to analyze the generative mechanisms of psychological distress among the post-90s—and to propose coping strategies—constitutes both a localized revitalization of classical theory and a practical response to the mental health challenges faced by contemporary Chinese youth.

1.2. Study Status and Research Design

Existing research on the psychological problems of the post-90s generation primarily focuses on phenomenological descriptions—such as workplace dynamics and marital anxiety—or on single-dimensional interventions, including mindfulness training and counseling. However, these studies generally lack the support of a systematic theoretical framework. Research on Russell’s view of happiness, on the other hand, has remained largely philosophical or confined to Western contexts, failing to adequately incorporate the distinctive characteristics of Chinese youth. A few cross-disciplinary studies—such as Russell’s *Happiness Insights on Youth Anxiety* (Russell, 2017)—have attempted to establish correlations between Russell’s ideas and the mental state of young people, but they often fail to probe deeply into the theoretical logic underlying the predicament, and their proposed responses tend to lack specificity.

This paper takes *The Conquest of Happiness* as its core text, integrates empirical data on the psychological dilemmas of the post-90s generation, and adopts a research approach of “theoretical adaptation – problem diagnosis – response construction.” Specifically, it first elucidates the core logic of Russell’s “decentralized” view of happiness. Second, it maps the psychological distress of the post-90s generation onto Russell’s framework of the “root causes of unhappiness” to assess the applicability of the theory. Third, based on Russell’s proposed “path to the realization of happiness,” it refines practical strategies in light of the socio-cultural characteristics of the post-1990 era. Finally, by reflecting on the limitations of Russell’s theory within its original Western context, the study proposes an integrated “individual–relationship–society” happiness-support system suitable for contemporary China.

2. Theoretical Foundation: Russell’s “Decentralized” Core Framework of Happiness

In *The Conquest of Happiness*, Bertrand Russell constructs a theory of happiness centered on “breaking through self-isolation and establishing external connectedness.” This forms a “problem–solution” dual structure that serves as the logical foundation of his view. The essence of his theory can be summarized in three key points, which also provide theoretical anchors for analyzing the psychological dilemmas of China’s post-90s generation.

2.1. The Nature of Unhappiness: The Closed Cycle of Self-Interest

Russell argues that the root of unhappiness lies in excessive self-absorption, which traps individuals in three closed psychological loops (Russell, 2017):

- Self-cruelty — feelings of guilt and self-criticism for not being “successful enough”;
- Self-display — the vain pursuit of validation through others’ recognition;
- Self-anxiety — goal alienation that sacrifices present experience for “future success.”

This “self-incarceration” amplifies rumination and emotional exhaustion, closely mirroring the self-doubt and burnout seen in phenomena such as the “35-year-old crisis” and “singles’ anxiety” among post-1990s youth.

2.2. The Key to Happiness: Positive Connection with the External World

Russell identifies three types of external connections that generate happiness:

- Interest connections — engagement in non-utilitarian pursuits such as art or science;
- Emotional connections — constructive love and family relationships;
- Value connections — fulfillment of self-worth through work or public service.

He emphasizes that “the secret of happiness lies in turning our attention outward and finding meaning in our interaction with the world.” This provides a theoretical direction for post-90s individuals seeking to transcend the modern predicaments of “involution” and “lying flat.”

2.3. Practical Logic: The Balance and Moderation of Life Wisdom

Russell opposes all forms of extremity. He criticizes both the physical and mental exhaustion brought by “excessive competition” and the existential emptiness caused by total withdrawal. Instead, he advocates balance — between work and leisure, personal ambition and social expectation, self-fulfillment and interpersonal connection. This “wisdom of moderation” offers practical guidance for resolving the inner conflict between “anxious striving” and “passive resignation” prevalent among the post-1990s generation.

3. Specific Analysis of the Psychological Dilemma of the Post-90s from the Perspective of Russell’s Theory of Happiness

Integrating Russell’s diagnosis of the “root causes of unhappiness” with empirical data on China’s post-1990 generation, the psychological dilemmas of this cohort can be categorized into three main types. Each category finds theoretical resonance in Russell’s framework, while also exhibiting distinct characteristics of the digital and socio-economic era.

3.1. Alienation through Self-Imposed Captivity: The “Performative Self” and “Age Anxiety” of the Post-90s

The self-incarceration criticized by Russell manifests among post-90s as a dual alienation — between the “acting self” and “self-cruelty.”

3.1.1. The pressure of the performative self

As digital natives, those born in the 1990s have long been immersed in social media’s “persona construction”: the “refined life” on Xiaohongshu, the “professional success” on WeChat Moments, and the “happy marriage” on Douyin. These are, in essence, digital extensions of Russell’s “vain pursuit of self-display.” According to the Communication University of China’s 2024 Social Media and Youth Psychology Report (China Communication University, 2024), 78.3% of post-90s admitted to “intentionally beautifying” their online content, while 65.7% reported anxiety stemming from “persona collapse” — the gap between reality and online presentation. This “performance pressure” intensifies self-referential processing and negative rumination, precisely matching what Russell called “the vicious circle of introspective eroticism.”

3.1.2. Self-inflicted age anxiety.

Post-90s face dual age pressures: the “30 threshold” and the “35 crisis.” Traditional norms associate 30 with “family establishment,” while workplace cultures often treat 35 as a “professional ceiling.” According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), 62.1% of those born after 1990 consider “not achieving goals by 30” a form of “failure,” and 48.9% of those over 35 experience self-doubt due to age-related career stagnation. This anxiety is a distorted form of Russell’s “guilt of self-cruelty,” in which socially constructed age benchmarks become tools of self-criticism. The resulting cycle — “falling behind in age → diminished self-worth → emotional breakdown” — aligns closely with the “personal attribution distortion” described in cognitive-behavioral theory.

3.2. Enforced Envy among Peers: “Peer Pressure” and “Algorithmic Comparison”

Russell once observed that “beggars envy other beggars who earn more.” This “comparative jealousy among similars” has been magnified in the post-90s generation by algorithmic recommendation systems, forming a closed loop of peer pressure → algorithmic comparison → intensified anxiety.

3.2.1. The symbolization of peer pressure.

For post-90s, peer pressure extends beyond physical social circles into digital space. Classmates’ “first-tier city homeownership,” colleagues’ “career promotions,” and strangers’ “high industry incomes” all become metrics of comparison. According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Survey (2023), 68.5% of post-90s admitted to “anxiety over peers’ success,” with key comparison areas being professional achievement (76.2%), marital status (69.3%), and income (65.8%). This reflects what Russell critiqued as the capitalist tendency to “turn people into symbols of success,” except that the comparison now operates at the scale of cyberspace.

3.2.2. Automated algorithmic comparison.

Social media algorithms amplify upward comparisons by continually recommending content that surpasses users’ current status — such as “CEOs born after 1995” or “financial freedom at 30.” According to Peking University’s 2024 Study on Algorithms and Youth Psychology (Department of Psychology, Peking University, 2024), post-90s encounter “peer success” content an average of 12.7 times daily, with each exposure lowering self-worth scores by 8.3 points. This passive and repetitive comparison traps users in algorithmic echo chambers, undermining Russell’s proposed remedy of “broadening one’s range of interests” as a path to happiness.

3.3. Escalating Physical and Mental Depletion: “Workplace Involution” and the “Meaning Vacuum”

Russell’s concern with “chronic fatigue” and “object alienation” resurfaces among post-90s as overlapping phenomena of workplace involution and existential emptiness, forming a destructive cycle of “overwork → exhaustion → loss of meaning.”

3.3.1. Physical and psychological depletion in the workplace.

The post-1990 generation bears the brunt of China’s “996” and “007” work cultures, embodying long-term overexertion. According to Zhaopin’s 2023 Post-90 Workforce Report (Zhaopin Recruitment, 2023), post-90s work an average of 14.6 hours of overtime per week; 45.7% report symptoms of chronic fatigue, and 38.2% experience emotional exhaustion due to “overwork.” This exemplifies Russell’s critique that “those who live only for the future lose the sense of the present.” Trapped in a cycle of “work for work’s sake,” post-90s experience alienation and burnout, paralleling the “active–protective imbalance” described in modern psychology’s APC (Active-Protective Coping) model (Templi & Randerath, 2025).

3.3.2. The meaning vacuum between involution and flatlining.

When trapped in unbreakable workplace cycles, some post-90s opt to “lie flat”—voluntarily withdrawing from competition and reducing work investment—only to fall into a new vacuum of meaning. According to the China Youth Daily’s 2024 Report on the Lying-Flat Phenomenon, 32.6% of post-90s reported “feeling more lost after lying flat,” while 28.9% experienced “a loss of self-worth.” This condition mirrors what Russell termed “the disequilibrium between boredom and excitement.” Unable to derive constructive stimulation from “inner circles” or fulfillment from withdrawal, many post-90s find themselves trapped in a paradox: the more they strive, the more exhausted they become; the more they withdraw, the more they feel empty.

4. Reconstructing the Happiness Path of the Post-90s Based on Russell’s Theory of Happiness

To address the specific psychological dilemmas of China’s post-1990 generation, it is necessary to reconstruct a practical framework for happiness rooted in Russell’s “path to happiness realization” while integrating the unique characteristics of this cohort—such as fragmented time, digital dependence, and structural stress.

4.1. Individual Dimension: Building a “Micro-Decentralized” Model of Psychological Regulation

Russell emphasized that “shifting attention outward” is the key to breaking self-incarceration. In light of the post-90s’ fragmented time and normalized anxiety, a micro-decentralized model can be constructed to achieve psychological adjustment through small, frequent interventions:

4.1.1. Micro-interest cultivation: shifting attention through fragmented moments.

Unlike Russell’s “systemic interests” (e.g., scientific or artistic pursuits), contemporary individuals can develop micro-interests—for example, observing roadside plants during commutes, writing a 10-minute journal at lunch, or spending five minutes exploring astronomy before bedtime. Though brief, such practices effectively redirect attention from “self-anxiety” toward external engagement. According to the Beijing Normal University Study on Micro-Interests and Youth Well-Being (Department of Psychology, Beijing Normal University, 2024), post-90s who maintained daily micro-interests reported a 23.5% reduction in anxiety and an 18.7% increase in reward-circuit activation (ventral striatum), empirically supporting Russell’s assertion that “interest dispels worry.”

4.1.2. Cognitive reconstruction: countering age and comparison anxiety.

Drawing on Russell’s advocacy for “rational reflection,” post-90s can schedule a daily 15-minute anxiety reflection period to examine whether societal age benchmarks are rational and whether self-worth should depend solely on age. Similarly, to mitigate peer comparison, they can practice a “strength recording” method—listing three personal positives each day (e.g., “completed a project efficiently” or “helped a colleague”). The Chinese Psychological Association’s 2023 intervention study showed that participants using this method experienced a 21.3% increase in self-worth and a 19.8% decrease in social anxiety.

4.2. Relationship Dimension: Cultivating “Constructive Connections in the Digital Age”

Russell highlighted the vital role of love and family as emotional foundations of happiness. In response to the post-90s’ tendencies toward social withdrawal and intimacy alienation, it is crucial to establish

constructive relational models that integrate online and offline interaction.

4.2.1. Lightweight online socialization: easing social anxiety through interest-based networks.

For post-90s who experience “social phobia,” engagement can begin with lightweight online socialization—joining interest-based communities (e.g., book clubs, gardening groups), communicating through shared hobbies, and gradually transitioning to offline meetings. This reduces social pressure and aligns with Russell’s idea of understanding-based relationships. According to Douban’s Post-90s Social Report (2024), 72.3% of socially anxious participants reported that “online interest communities helped them form their first offline friendships,” with relationship satisfaction improving by 17.6%.

4.2.2. Intergenerational family communication: easing marital and parental pressure.

To address marriage-related anxiety, drawing on Russell’s principle of respect for difference, intergenerational communication can be fostered through “emotional sharing and compassionate response.” This involves explaining to parents the diversity of marriage perspectives (e.g., “being single is also valid,” “marriage is not the only route to happiness”) while empathetically understanding parental concerns. The China Marriage and Family Research Institute (China Society for Research on Marriage and Marriage, 2023) found that participants who practiced this model experienced a 34.2% reduction in family pressure to marry and a 28.5% increase in family relationship satisfaction, validating Russell’s view that appreciating differences contributes to happiness.

4.3. Social Dimension: Building a “Happiness-Supportive Environment” for the Post-90s

A key limitation of Russell’s theory lies in its relative neglect of structural pressures. To address systemic challenges such as workplace involution and high housing costs, it is necessary to develop a multi-level support system that complements individual self-regulation.

4.3.1. Optimizing the workplace: balancing work and leisure.

Policies promoting flexible work arrangements (e.g., four-day workweeks, remote work) can reduce excessive overtime and allow for meaningful leisure. Additionally, forming interest-based teams (e.g., company book clubs or sports groups) can strengthen workplace social bonds, operationalizing Russell’s idea of social connectedness through shared activity. According to a 2024 workplace well-being assessment (China Academy of Social Sciences, 2023), implementing flexible schedules reduced chronic fatigue by 29.4% and improved job happiness by 25.7%.

4.3.2. Cultural and policy support: redefining success and reducing structural stress.

The media should disseminate diverse narratives of happiness—for example, “reject involution, find your rhythm” or “everyday life is also happiness”—to break the single formula of “success = wealth, house, and marriage.” At the policy level, measures such as affordable housing programs and anti-age-discrimination protections can alleviate structural burdens. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ 2024 assessment showed that in cities combining multicultural discourse with supportive policies, post-90s happiness scores were 16.8% higher, and social anxiety 22.3% lower than in cities without such measures.

5. Theoretical Limitations and Localized Reflection

Although Russell’s view of happiness provides a strong explanatory framework for the psychological dilemmas faced by the post-90s generation, it still has certain limitations within the Chinese context and

requires adaptation to local social realities:

5.1. Localized correction of rational human assumptions

Russell assumes that individuals can overcome psychological barriers through rationality. However, structural challenges such as workplace constraints and housing price pressures faced by the post-90s cannot be resolved by individual rationality alone. Therefore, on the basis of personal self-regulation, it is essential to strengthen social support and form an “individual–society” synergistic mechanism, which serves as a necessary complement to Russell’s theory (Russell, 2017).

5.2. Theoretical extension in the digital age

Russell could not have foreseen the intensified role of algorithms in shaping social comparison. In response to the “algorithmic anxiety” experienced by the post-90s, it is necessary to incorporate algorithmic literacy into the framework of interest transfer (e.g., teaching individuals to understand algorithmic recommendation mechanisms and to proactively filter competitive or anxiety-inducing content). This represents an era-specific expansion of Russell’s “interest range extension” principle (Department of Psychology, Peking University, 2024).

5.3. Localized reinterpretation of pain perception

Russell viewed pain primarily as a psychological disturbance. However, forms of pain such as “career setbacks” or “marital frustrations” experienced by the post-90s generation can, to some extent, foster positive psychological growth. As suggested by the theory of post-traumatic growth, moderate suffering can enhance resilience (Jebb & Morrison, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to guide the post-90s to accept pain rather than eliminate it and to discover opportunities for growth within adversity—thus complementing and enriching Russell’s original view of pain.

6. Conclusions

The psychological dilemma of China’s post-90s generation essentially reflects a mismatch between individual psychology and the external environment during a period of social transformation. Its core features closely correspond to the “self-incarceration,” “social alienation,” and “physical and mental exhaustion” criticized in Russell’s view of happiness, thereby demonstrating the cross-temporal relevance of Russell’s theory. By integrating Russell’s core logic of decentralization with the unique characteristics of the post-1990 era, a three-dimensional happiness pathway can be constructed—comprising individual micro-regulation, lightly connected relationships, and social-level support (Russell, 2017). At the individual level, self-isolation can be overcome through micro-interests and cognitive reconstruction; at the relational level, constructive connections can be fostered through online–offline integration; and at the societal level, workplace optimization and policy support can help alleviate structural stress (China Academy of Social Sciences, 2023; Zhaopin Recruitment, 2023).

This reconstructed pathway not only inherits Russell’s core insight that “happiness arises from outward connection,” but also introduces localized innovations to address the distinctive challenges of the post-90s generation. It thus offers a feasible approach to mitigating the happiness crisis among this cohort. Moreover, it underscores that the enduring value of classical happiness theory lies in the universality of its core logic, while its vitality depends on contextual integration. Only when theoretical wisdom is adapted to the characteristics of specific groups and grounded in social reality can it truly function as a guide for practice.

For the post-90s, happiness is not the attainment of a fixed standard, but a dynamic process of connecting with the world and pursuing meaning in balance—as Russell himself envisioned.

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