Application of the Developmental Group Counseling in the Prevention of Psychological Crisis among International Students

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Abstract

Research purpose: to verify the preventive effect of developmental group psychological counseling on the psychological crisis of international students in colleges and universities, and provide a basis for the psychological crisis intervention of these students. The researchers of the study carried out a sampling questionnaire survey among 10 universities in China, and group intervention was conducted to select subjects that fit the measurement significance. The survey adopts the Coping Style Scale, the Perceived Social Support Scale, the Adolescent Life Stress Scale, and the Crisis Vulnerability Scale to evaluate the effects before and after the interventions. The results show that after the counselling, significant differences emerged in the coping styles of Help-seeking (T = −2.31, $p < 0.05$), Problem-solving (T = −0.41, $p < 0.05$), Rationalizing (T = −0.06, $p < 0.05$) and Friends' support (T = 2.37, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the paper concludes that through group counseling, international students would see their ability improve in solving problems, seeking help and perceiving friends' support.

Keywords

Developmental Group Counseling, International Students, Psychological Crisis

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed that an increasing number of international students are choosing to pursue advanced studies in China. According to IEE, the number of international students in China has shown a continual increase year by year, rising from 328,000 in 2013 to 492,000 in 2019. The new era provides colleges and universities with new opportunities as well as challenges, requiring

them to take the increasingly important responsibilities in cultivating international students. As a result, it is of great significance to further explore the mental health status of these students as well as their ability of preventing and coping with psychological crises.

1.1. Definition and Literature Review of Psychological Crises of International Students in China

Far away from home, international students are more prone to psychological crises as they have to cope with pressures from study, interpersonal relationships, cultural adaptation and living customs, for which more attention needed to be paid to their mental health. Mental crisis refers to the psychological imbalance that occurs when individuals face sudden or major life adversity (Zhan & Li, 2005). At present, the psychology issue of international students in China has been a popular research object, as 763 results are obtained by searching the knowledge engine such as CNKI with the keywords of "international students" and "psychology". They mainly involve the psychological education, psychological status investigation and countermeasures of international students. However, there are few investigations on the psychological crisis of international students. Only 12 results related to this topic can be found on the document databases such as CNKI. These studies mainly focus on the analysis of psychological crisis stressors of international students, crisis intervention suggestions for colleges and universities, case studies and research on the psychological crisis of young international students (Wang & Jiang, 2016; Wang, 2017; Wen, 2013; Pu & Zhao, 2020), but there is a lack of research on psychological crisis prevention and intervention methods. Therefore, it is apparent that the psychological problems of international students should not be ignored. Existing research compares mental health status and coping styles of the international students in China and the Chinese students in colleges and universities (Wu, Xiang, & Xie, 2010), finding out that the former's coping styles are significantly different from those of the latter. International students tend to adopt negative coping styles such as fantasy and retreat, and more easily show obsession-compulsion disorder, interpersonal sensitivity and anxiety. Another study uses SCL-90 Symptom Scale to investigate the mental health status of 248 medical students in China, discovering that the existing or prone mental health problems of international medical students in China include paranoia, obsession-compulsion disorder, interpersonal sensitivity and depression (Wang & Liu, 2017).

1.2. Definition and Literature Review of Developmental Group Counseling

Group counseling, one of the ways of crisis intervention, is a form of psychological counseling by taking one group as a unit. By providing the chances of observing, learning and experiencing, group counseling enables the individuals

to perceive, discuss and accept themselves (Wang, 2017). With the interpersonal interaction in the group, they can also adjust or improve their relationship with others, cultivate new attitudes and the ways of acting to gradually get used to helping others. The keywords "developmental", "group" and "counseling" lead to 53 records in the knowledge engine such as CNKI, indicating that developmental group counseling fits the physical and mental development characteristics of college students and is often used to promote mental health education in colleges and universities (Ren et al., 2008). Therefore, this study selects developmental group counseling as the intervention method. Related research has shown that developmental group counseling is one of the important ways of mental health education in colleges and universities. It can promote the healthy growth and all-round development of students and solve the common psychological problems for college students efficiently (Li, 2014). In addition, developmental group counseling has positive impacts on the group members' cognition, emotion and coping styles, as it can boost the members' confidence and facilitate the establishment of their new positive behaviours (Ren et al., 2008). In general, with the nature of mutual help, developmental group counseling creates opportunities for group members to care for and aid others, thus improving their confidence and sense of value in interpersonal communication (Min, 1996). Previous studies have also confirmed that group members can better understand themselves and others in an atmosphere of listening and sharing, enabling them to achieve their personal development goals (Yalom, 2010). What is more, after taking part in the developmental group counseling, these participants have shown positive changes in mentalization ability, emotional regulation, self-esteem level and cohesion (Wang et al., 2017; Allen & Fonagy, 2016; Li & Lu, 2005; Gross, 1998; Jia & Fan, 2011).

To sum up, this study hypothesizes that developmental group counseling for international students in China can effectively improve their situations if they are suffering from interpersonal sensitivity, anxiety, fear, depression or any other psychological problems. The method can also encourage them to deal with psychological crises more positively and enhance their ability to deal with psychological problems.

2. Research Method

The process of measuring is divided into two stages. In the first stage, a questionnaire was issued to the international students throughout China to carry out a general survey; while in the second one, the students who got low overall scores in the previous survey were selected to participate in the developmental group counseling.

2.1. Research Objects

International students in China were chosen as the research object of this study. By using the cluster sampling method, the researchers distributed questionnaires

to universities with international students in China, and collected 469 back from ten universities, including Jinan University, South China University of Technology, Shandong University, Beihang University (or Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics), Chongqing University, Chongqing Jiaotong University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, South China Normal University, Soochow University and Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics. 465 samples were valid, among which 213 were males (45.8%) and 252 were females (54.2%).

2.2. Research Approach

This study conducted data analysis based on the questionnaires filled in by 465 large samples. The demographic statistics of the subjects are shown in Table 1.

According to the table, the scores of immature coping styles (such as self-blaming, fantasy, avoiding, etc.) are higher, and the one for the problem-solving behavior is lower than the reference interval value. The overall standard deviation is above average, and there are significant differences among individuals, showing that the mental health status of international students can be improved. Therefore, this study openly recruited subjects from the international students of Jinan University. Those who scored in the last 27% in the evaluation of life stress, psychological vulnerability, coping styles and perceived social support were selected as the recruited group. Then, looking forward to selecting volunteers who are willing to share and committed to full participation in groups to join the group, the researchers talked to these students one by one and finally pick up 29 candidates to participate in this experiment. Table 2 presents the demographic statistics of the subjects.

2.3. Group Counseling Program

In the study, the enrolled members were divided into three groups, namely Group A, B and C. Each group was led by three senior psychological consultants to conduct "sandwich" group counseling once a week, a total of 6 times. The counseling has six topics, i.e. "Who am I", "Where am I from", "Where am I", "Present Difficulties", "My Fantasy" and "Where am I Going to", enabling the group members to know each other from the start, to understand themselves and the members through the warm and safe community relations and group activities. The group members reviewed their own growing experience, looking for the good and effective one that can help them with planning for the future. At the same time, they drew strength from the group and harvested friendship, enhancing the level of their mental health.

2.4. Follow-Up Evaluation

The experimental group members were followed up 2 months after the end of group intervention by collecting their feedback.

Table 1. Averages and standard deviation of a general survey of 465 students.

Deviations		Averages	Standard Deviations	Reference Range
Coping Style	Problem-Solving	0.26	0.17	0.60 - 0.75
	Help-seeking	0.55	0.30	0.15 - 0.30
	Self-blaming	0.41	0.21	0.25 - 0.40
	Fantasizing	0.39	0.23	0.30 - 0.45
	Avoiding	0.43	0.22	0.25 - 0.40
	Rationalizing	0.56	0.20	0.25 - 0.35
Perceived Social Support	Family's support	20.36	4.74	12.3 - 20
	Friends' support	18.37	4.86	12.3 - 20
	Other support	18.48	4.96	12.3 - 20
	Total score	57.21	12.60	37 - 60
Stress Event	Family	32.53	11.22	11 - 35
	Development	12.39	4.55	5 - 10
	Learning	35.20	10.47	5 - 10
	Life and socialization	76.50	21.77	11 - 35
Crisis Vulnerability		8.51	3.19	5-10

Table 2. Demographic statistics of the 29 subjects.

Demographic Deviations		Number of People	Proportion (%)
Gender	Male	10	34.5
	Female	19	65.5
Age	15 - 18	8	27.6
	19 - 21	21	72.4
Religious Belief	Yes	2	6.9
	No	27	93.1
Siblings	Only child	3	10.3
	One	17	58.6
	Two	7	24.1
	Three or more	2	6.9
Tuition Source	Self-paying	28	96.6
	At public expense	0	0
	Supported by scholarship	1	3.4
Part-time Job	Yes	29	100
	No	0	0

Two months after the group experiment, the researchers conducted follow-up interviews with the experimental group members to collect their feelings about the group counseling for tracking study.

3. Research Results

3.1. Overview of the Large Sample of 465 International Students

Firstly, the study presented an analysis based on the large sample data of 465 international students. Table 3 is given to show the averages and standard deviations of the data as well as the structure and reliability of the questionnaire.

In this experiment, all the subscales did show good reliability with coefficient α between 0.60 and 0.94, which met the requirements of psychometrics. According to the data, international students scored high in immature coping styles, and their point in "Problem-solving" was below the reference range. In general, the total points of the Perceived Social Support Scale were of a moderate level. In addition, the stressful events of these international students primarily came from the aspects of life and social contact, followed by study, family and development. Their scores in the Crisis Vulnerability Scale were within the range in which they could survive most crises, but there were also a few cases where they scored too low to maintain psychological balance under the impact of crisis events. Through the sample survey, it's obvious that some international students need further improve their mental health, which verifies the necessity of conducting the developmental group counseling.

Table 3. Structure and credibility of the questionnaire.

Variables		Averages	Standard deviations	Reference range	No. of items	Coefficient α
Coping Style	Problem-solving	0.26	0.17	0.60 - 0.75	11	0.60
	Help-seeking	0.55	0.30	0.15 - 0.30	10	0.52
	Self-blaming	0.41	0.21	0.25 - 0.40	10	0.82
	Fantasizing	0.39	0.23	0.30 - 0.45	10	0.66
	Avoiding	0.43	0.22	0.25 - 0.40	11	0.63
	Rationalizing	0.56	0.20	0.25 - 0.35	11	0.63
Perceived Social Support	Family's support	20.36	4.74	12.3 - 20	4	0.87
	Friends' support	18.37	4.86	12.3 - 20	4	0.89
	Other support	18.48	4.96	12.3 - 20	4	0.81
	Total points	57.21	12.60	37 - 60	12	0.92
Stressful Events	Family-related	32.53	11.22	11 - 35	10	0.93
	Development-related	12.39	4.55	5 - 10	5	0.79
	Study-related	35.20	10.47	5 - 10	12	0.90
	Life and social contact-related	76.50	21.77	11 - 35	27	0.94
Crisis Vulnerability		8.51	3.19	5-10	15	0.60

3.2. Pre-Post Test Data Analysis of Factor Scores in the Coping Style Scale of the Experimental Group

In this study, the SPSS 21.0 Paired Samples t-Test was used to analyze the pre-post test data of scale factor scores based on the sample consisting of 29 international students, and the results are shown in Table 4.

As seen from the table, the factors of "Fantasizing" and "Rationalizing" in the Coping Style Scale and the factor "Friends' support" in the Perceived Social Support Scale did present a statistical increase in the post test respectively (t = −2.31, $p < 0.05$). This indicated that after the developmental group counseling, the students behaved better in terms of positive coping styles and perceived social support skills (Figure 1).

Table 4. Pre-post test data analysis of scale factor scores of the experimental group ($\overline{x} \pm s$).

		Pre-test scores	Post-test scores	t	p
Coping Style	Problem-solving	0.77 ± 0.10	0.86 ± 0.13	−0.41*	0.039*
	Help-seeking	0.50 ± 0.19	0.68 ± 0.21	−2.31*	0.048*
	Self-blaming	0.43 ± 0.29	0.39 ± 0.28	0.62	0.684
	Fantasizing	0.59 ± 0.22	0.61 ± 0.19	−0.61	0.545
	Avoiding	0.55 ± 0.17	0.42 ± 0.19	1.03	0.110
	Rationalizing	0.42 ± 0.17	0.47 ± 0.17	−0.06*	0.029*
Stressful Events	Study-related	36.17 ± 8.76	35.83 ± 8.42	0.17	0.87
	Life and social contact-related	79.28 ± 16.51	79.93 ± 19.96	0.28	0.78
	Development-related	13.86 ± 4.94	13.79 ± 4.61	0.16	0.43
	Family-related	38.38 ± 6.55	36.14 ± 8.59	1.05	0.30
Crisis Vulnerability	Crisis vulnerability	8.24 ± 3.30	8.66 ± 2.92	−0.54	0.59
Perceived Social Support	Total points	58.69 ± 8.10	63.15 ± 12.64	−0.79	0.48
	Family's support	20.86 ± 2.90	20.41 ± 4.62	0.52	0.61
	Friends' support	18.72 ± 3.61	23.14 ± 5.08	2.37*	0.05*
	Other support	19.10 ± 3.83	19.82 ± 4.37	−0.90	0.28

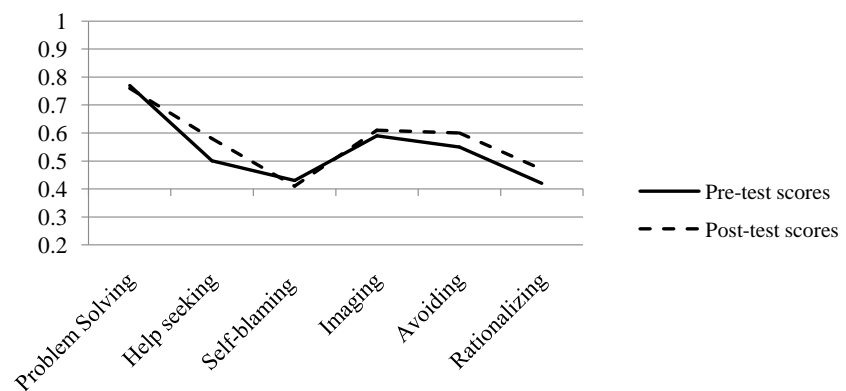*Remark*: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$, the same below.

Figure 1. Line chart based on pre-post tests of the coping style scale.

After the developmental group counseling, the students' scores on the "Help-seeking" and "Rationalizing" factors of the Coping Style Scale demonstrated a remarkable increase, which could indicate that the positive feedback from group counseling motivated their willingness to seek for help and improved their ability to think rationally. As for the "Self-blaming", there was no statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest, however, an evident decrease of the score still existed. In terms of the "Problem-solving", scores did not change significantly during the process. It's possible that their problems couldn't be solved completely in such a short intervention period.

In the Stressful Events Scale, there were no significant pre-post differences in the four factors, i.e., "Study-related", "Life and social contact-related", "Development-related", and "Family-related", probably due to a low incidence of stressful events in the students' daily life. While post-test scores of the Crisis Vulnerability Scale were slightly higher than pre-test ones, but in general, the group members' crisis vulnerability was at a lower level during the pre-test, so there was not a noteworthy change in between.

Total scores of the Perceived Social Scale were between 37 and 60, indicating a moderate level. It's probably because they did perceive enough social support, so in this scale only the factor "Friends' support" saw a score increase after the developmental group counseling, while no significant difference shown in other factors ($p > 0.05$).

3.3. Word Frequency Analysis of the International Students' Appraisal

In addition, the researchers conducted follow-up interviews with these international students, and distributed an open-ended questionnaire to all group members to collect their feelings about the group counseling two months after the group experiment, based on which the researchers made a high-frequency word analysis (see Table 4). Word frequency refers to the frequency with which a word occurs in a given text. Based on the word frequency analysis, positive words such as "thank", "share", "opportunity", "happy", "friends", and "enjoy" presented at a high frequency, showing that the members participating in the group counseling had a high level of satisfaction with little negative feedback. In a way, these high-frequency words exactly visualized the very characteristics of developmental group counseling, namely, the kind of counseling enables the students to express and know better about themselves in a comfortable atmosphere, while creating opportunities for them to care for others. Therefore, it's arguably reasonable to draw a conclusion that the group counseling has brought positive effects and changes to the involved international students (see Table 5).

3.4. Scale Factor Score Analysis of Experimental and Control Groups

Six months after the experiment, the researchers distributed questionnaires to

both the experimental group and the control group, then analyzed the factor scores in each scale of the control group and those of the experimental group in the post-test stage by using SPSS21.0 Independent Samples t Test, and the results are as follows (see Table 6).

Table 5. High-frequency word analysis of the international students' appraisal of group counseling.

Key words	Word frequency
Experience	16
Different, thank	14
Share	13
Development	11
Opportunity	8
Great	7
Helped, friends, happy, learn	6
Good, better, health	5
enjoy	3

Table 6. Scale factor scores analysis of 29 samples in experimental and control groups.

		Control group	Experimental Posttest group	t	p
Coping Style	Problem-solving	0.24 ± 0.12	0.76 ± 0.13	−16.00***	0.00***
	Help-seeking	0.46 ± 0.20	0.58 ± 0.21	0.76	0.45
	Self-blaming	0.55 ± 0.23	0.41 ± 0.28	0.06	0.96
	Fantasizing	0.38 ± 0.21	0.61 ± 0.19	−4.42***	0.00***
	Avoiding	0.39 ± 0.16	0.60 ± 0.19	−4.67***	0.00***
	Rationalizing	0.58 ± 0.18	0.47 ± 0.17	2.43*	0.02
Stressful Events	Study-related	35.59 ± 10.71	35.83 ± 8.42	−0.10	0.92
	Life and social contact-related	72.48 ± 21.16	77.93 ± 19.96	−0.96	0.34
	Family-related	32.41 ± 10.87	13.79 ± 4.61	8.49***	0.00***
	Development-related	11.07 ± 4.86	36.14 ± 8.59	−13.68***	0.00***
Perceived Social Support	Family's support	20.55 ± 3.70	20.41 ± 4.62	0.13	0.90
	Friends' support	19.93 ± 3.87	21.14 ± 4.08	2.72	0.04***
	Other support	19.41 ± 3.78	17.90 ± 4.37	1.42	0.16
Crisis Vulnerability		8.52 ± 2.54	8.66 ± 2.92	−0.19	0.85

Remark: $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$, the same below.

Based on the analysis, it's obvious that significant differences emerged between the control group and experimental posttest group in four factors of the Coping Style Scale, i.e. "Problem-solving" (t = −16.00, p < 0.001), "Fantasizing" (t = −4.42, p < 0.001), "Avoiding" (t = −4.67, p < 0.001), and "Rationalizing" (t = 2.43, p < 0.05). And in the Stressful Event Scale, scores of the "Family-related" and "Development-related" showed noteworthy changes respectively in the two groups, with the score of the former being significantly higher in the control group (t = 8.49, p < 0.001) and that of the latter being remarkably higher in the experimental posttest group (t = −13.68, p < 0.001). In the meantime, "Friends' support" of the Perceived Social Support Scale showcased a higher score in the experimental posttest group than the control group (t = 2.72, p < 0.05).

In addition, previous studies have shown that coping style is a significant predictor of crisis vulnerability, and different coping styles would make a difference to the level of crisis vulnerability, namely, the lower the crisis vulnerability people have, the more actively they would behave when coping with happenings. In the present study, a corresponding correlation effect has been found.

Table 7 showed that the international students' crisis vulnerability was positively correlated with Self-blaming coping style, which indicated that the more vulnerable they are amid crises, the more likely they tend to blame themselves to cope with problems, and vice versa. This correlation is consistent with previous research.

In another correlation analysis of the large samples of 465 international students, researchers also found that "Crisis Vulnerability" was negatively correlated with "Family's support", "Friends' support" and "Other support" (see Table 8).

In a word, the more social support these students perceive, the more likely they are to cope with crises successfully. On the contrary, the less social support they perceive, the more vulnerable they would be amid crises.

Table 7. Correlation between crisis vulnerability and self-blaming coping style in the experimental pretest group with 29 subjects.

	Averages	Standard deviations	Crisis Vulnerability
Crisis Vulnerability	8.24	3.30	1
Self-blaming	0.43	0.29	0.467*

Table 8. Correlation between crisis vulnerability and perceived social support based on the large samples.

	Averages	Standard deviations	Crisis vulnerability
Crisis Vulnerability	8.51	3.19	1
Family's support	20.36	4.74	−0.424**
Friends' support	18.37	4.86	−0.305**
Other support	18.48	4.96	−0.388**

4. Discussion

4.1. Sample Overview

The study is conducted based on the large sample data of international students from ten Chinese universities, aiming to get a general understanding of the psychological condition of international students in China, and the results are proved to be consistent with previous studies. Firstly, international students tend to adopt negative coping styles when facing problems, and they are likely to resort to coping styles like self-blaming, fantasizing, and avoiding, instead of trying to solve problems. Secondly, even though the Crisis Vulnerability of most international students is maintained at a medium level, some of them perform badly when coping with crises, hence certain emotional problems. Thirdly, most stressful events confronting these students arise from academic life and interpersonal interactions. And due to obstacles in cultural communication and other aspects, they are more likely to be nervous and sensitive to interpersonal relationships.

4.2. Experiment Results

Through the intervention in the form of developmental group counseling, the study collected and analyzed the data to conclude that international students in the experimental group who participated in group activities got improvements in the following aspects:

1) In terms of coping styles, the score of "Help-seeking" saw a noteworthy increase in the post test, and the score of "Problem-solving" in the experimental group was also higher compared with that of the control group. The changes indicated that the team members adopted more positive approaches to coping with problems, which fully demonstrates the effectiveness of group counseling.

2) According to the semantic analysis of participants' appraisal, positive words such as "happy", "friends" and "enjoy" appeared more frequently. In addition, social learning took place among group members in the process of group counseling, which would help them improve their interpersonal skills. Meanwhile, group cohesion gradually formed and strengthened would create a strong sense of belonging and identity among these students, endowing them with significant social experience.

3) Correlation analysis showed that the Crisis Vulnerability of these international students is negatively correlated with Perceived Social Support. It revealed that when encountering crises, these students could perceive less social support if their vulnerability is higher. As an effective intervention method, group counseling created opportunities for these students to participate in group activities after busy studies. On the one hand, students were granted a vent for pressure, and on the other hand, they communicated more with peers to receive and perceive more social support, which could bring down the crisis vulnerability to a certain extent so that they could better perceive social support. In this way, they would be equipped with the more effective coping styles and handle crises more easily.

4.3. Preventive Measures

1) First of all, colleges and universities should keep a closer eye on international students' psychological situation to guarantee the necessary early crisis warning. It is required to predict and prevent possible formation and outbreak of psychological crises, then formulate corresponding strategies to deal with them promptly. Colleges and universities should also establish a system for monitoring and early warning, provide a harmonious environment for these foreign students studying abroad, and help them get through the adaptation period smoothly.

2) Some studies show that physical exercise plays an active role in promoting international students' psychological health and preventing related crises. From both physical and psychological perspectives, physical exercise is recognized as an effective tool to promote physical fitness and improve psychological health. Therefore, it's of great importance to encourage these students to strengthen physical exercise and to cultivate correct sports values in their minds. In this regard, it's also necessary to guide the students to master scientific principles and methods of physical exercise.

4.4. Deficiency and Prospect

Due to some objective reasons such as inadequate time and other personal factors, some aspects remain to be improved in this study. For example, given the relatively small sample size and low frequency of group counseling sessions, people may fail to visualize more significant differences between pre-test and post-test results. And the tracking survey of the experimental group members was only maintained for six months, etc. That being so, more future studies are expected to further promote the psychological health development of international students and guide them to adapt to the new life early, and it's hoped that these studies would base on larger sample size and more group counseling sessions while taking cultural differences into consideration as well.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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