

Review on the Ethical Issues of Peer Counseling in College Mental Health

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Abstract

Peer psychological counseling is a kind of mental health education model for all students, rich and effective. Peer psychological counseling in colleges and universities faces ethical dilemmas in the aspects of dual relationship, confidentiality and the competence of counselors because of the particularity of the relationship and the difference of professional requirements. It is imperative to train the professional competence of peer counselors and develop and perfect the ethics applicable to peer counseling in colleges and universities.

Keywords

Peer counseling; Ethical issues; College mental health; College students.

1. INTRODUCTION

The high attention of the state is the core of the digital education of mental health in colleges and universities. In 2021, the General Office of the Ministry of Education of China issued a notice on Strengthening the Management of students' mental health, pointing out that "strengthening security management, increasing comprehensive support, equipping and building a strong backbone team, and the ratio of teachers to students in universities is not less than 1: 4000 proportion is equipped with mental health education full-time teachers and each school is equipped with at least 2 ", and also stressed that "strengthen source management, comprehensively improve students' mental health literacy," Pay attention to and help students who have difficulties in learning and poor academic performance. Teachers should give individual guidance in time, encourage peer help among students, and help students relieve psychological pressure and boost their confidence in learning. Timely understanding of students in interpersonal communication, love feelings, collective life encountered difficulties and problems, targeted individual talks, group counseling, etc., to help young students establish a correct view of friends, love." Domestic and foreign research shows that more than 20% of college students suffer from psychological disorders such as depression, and only a small number of these students seek professional psychological help from the school (Auerbach, Alonso & Axinn, 2017). Higher education has always paid attention to how to help such college students alleviate their symptoms and complete their studies, considering that the first choice for college students with psychological distress is friends (Li Fenglan, Zhou Chunxiao, Dong Hongyuan, 2016). Peer psychological counseling has gradually become a public vision. From the perspective of college students' mental health needs, it actively guides and helps college students get rid of psychological problems through peer support and help (Ma Xin, 2020). These people who can provide psychological assistance and behavioral models for their peers are called peer counselors, or peer helpers, peer counselors, etc. (Shi Fanghua, 2007). To a certain extent, peer psychological counseling relieves the pressure of insufficient mental health education professionals in colleges and universities, plays a certain role in the prevention and

intervention of psychological crisis, and becomes an indispensable force for mental health education in colleges and universities (Zhou Guoli, 2021).

In 2007, the Code of Ethics for Clinical and Counseling Psychology Work (first edition) of the Chinese Psychological Society was officially promulgated. Five years later, China promulgated the Mental Health Law, which was officially implemented in May 2013. It can be seen that psychological counseling and treatment have gradually gained social recognition and attention in terms of law and ethics (Qin Shurui, 2021). In foreign countries, peer counseling is a highly professional job with strict ethical requirements for peer counselors. Peer counselors must understand their work goals, abide by the two ethical requirements of professional psychological counseling and peer psychological counseling, and have clear work bottom lines and boundaries (Zhou Li, Lei Li, 2016). Peer counseling in China is mainly based on peer health education. Many peer counselors provide similar counseling services to classmates or roommates in accordance with the principle of proximity, which is more convenient in operation. In the long run, this principle violates the ethical requirements of peer counseling and psychological counseling. It does not guarantee the interests of both visitors and peer counselors (Feng Yi, Xu Ziwei, Ning Pengfei, 2020). Ethical requirements are the embodiment of professionalism, and lower ethical requirements limit the professional development of domestic peer counseling to a large extent. However, no ethical code has been issued specifically for peer counseling in colleges and universities, and ethical dilemmas remain.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER COUNSELING

Peer psychological counseling first appeared in the United States in the 1960s. Due to social crises such as race riots and campus riots, American teenagers had various social and psychological problems such as drug abuse, dropout and crime under various pressures. However, psychological teachers in American schools were very scarce, so psychological experts realized that more psychological counseling resources should be explored. Therefore, American colleges and universities try to select, train and supervise college students to participate in mental health services to provide support, encouragement or various information for their peers to help them solve various problems in study, life and psychology, namely peer psychological counseling, which is also translated as peer counseling or peer psychological counseling (Mamarchev, 1981). In the 1970s, the concept of peer psychological counseling was first introduced in Taiwan, and some institutions began to implement peer counseling programs such as "Lifeline" and "Family Support Center". At present, more than 73% of colleges and universities in Taiwan have established peer psychological counseling organizations (Niu Gezheng, 1994). The emergence of peer counseling in China is attributed to the contradiction between students' rapidly increasing demand for counseling and the inadequacy of university counseling centers (Feng Yi, 2020). Studies have shown that peer psychological counseling can minimize the difference between mentors and mentored, make up for the lack of professionals in number and energy, and also help improve adolescents' psychological self-help and ability to help others (Shi Fanghua, 2007).

In general, peer psychological counseling emphasizes voluntary support and help activities at the psychological level. Based on the characteristics of peer group culture and convenient communication, peer psychological counseling applied to mental health education in colleges and universities can improve the construction of psychological counseling teams and promote the development of mental health education. Nowadays, peer psychological counseling is widely used in mental health education in schools at home and abroad, effectively helping teenagers deal with problems in stress management, interpersonal relationships, love, studies, career, drug abuse, self-exploration and other aspects (Huang Xiaozhong, Gong Yangchun, Fang Ting, 2007).

3. ETHICAL ISSUES IN PEER COUNSELING

3.1. Security Issues

Compared with full-time counselors, the position of peer psychological counselors in colleges and universities has more unstable factors, such as personal factors such as internships in other places and graduation, which often have to interrupt the consultation. Visitors may be referred to other peer counselors, and it is not possible to keep the situation of visitors completely confidential in the process of work handover, and it is not appropriate to disclose relevant information and materials. How to balance the principle of handover and confidentiality is an ethical issue that needs careful consideration. In addition, peer counselors' status as students makes them more likely to actively or passively disclose client information to counselors or other relevant educators.

In terms of environmental Settings, some colleges and universities set peer counseling rooms in apartment buildings or student activity centers, and the environment of consulting rooms cannot meet the standards of professional consulting rooms, such as the sound insulation of consulting rooms (Xu Yanping, 2018). In this work setting, the dense irrelevant personnel and the substandard environment of the consulting room increase the difficulty of consulting confidentiality to a certain extent.

The Code of Ethics for Clinical and Counseling Psychology of the Chinese Psychological Association (Second edition) stipulates that psychologists should create, use, store, transmit and handle professional work-related information in strict confidentiality in accordance with laws, regulations and professional ethics (Chinese Psychological Association, 2018). However, the person in charge of the mental health center in colleges and universities and the relevant leaders in charge of student work may regularly check the preservation of peer counseling files, and refusing to check on the grounds of protecting the privacy of visitors is weak.

3.2. Dual relationship problem

According to the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Worker, "When social workers have more than one kind of relationship with clients, double or multiple relationships arise, regardless of whether the relationship is professional, social or business" (Li Yang, Qian Mingyi, 2007). In China, peer counseling focuses on peer health education and has low ethical requirements for peer counselors. Many peer counselors provide similar consulting services for classmates or roommates according to the principle of proximity, including listening and giving suggestions. From the point of view of operation, this way is more convenient. In the long run, this principle violates the ethical requirements of peer psychology, has the problem of dual identity, and does not guarantee the interests of both visitors and peer counselors (Feng Yi, 2019).

Factors such as social culture, occupational environment characteristics and low ethical consciousness make the incidence of dual relationship in counseling in China relatively high (Tang Fang, Zhao Jingbo, 2013). Peer counseling occurs in the same school, the same major, the same grade and even between students in the same class, and there is a real relationship other than consulting relationship, and it is more likely to develop a relationship such as friends and partners. Peer counselors are also prone to "preconceptions" that make it difficult to treat visiting students objectively, resulting in a conflict of interests between the two parties, so that the interests of the visitors cannot be guaranteed (Huang Jie, 2019).

3.3. Competency issues

The definition of competency by the American Counseling Association (ACA) is that psychologists provide services, teach and conduct behavioral research for others in related fields within their professional competence on the basis of appropriate educational training,

supervision, consulting, research and professional experience (Zeng Haiping, 2014). The Code of Ethics for Clinical and Counseling Psychology Work of the Chinese Psychological Association (Second edition) clearly stipulates that psychologists should carry out assessment and counseling work in a responsible manner within professional boundaries and personal capabilities, while paying attention to maintaining their professional competence, attending professional training, and seeking professional supervision when necessary (Chinese Psychological Association, 2018). Some researchers have pointed out that the competence of peer psychological counseling refers to the comprehensive abilities such as knowledge, skills, values and personality traits that should be possessed in the peer psychological counseling work under the peer psychological counseling situation, and its core elements are professional knowledge, professional skills, values and personal characteristics (Zhou Guoli, 2021). Some scholars also believe that competency features can be divided into threshold features at the entry level and competency features that reflect the difference in ability, and threshold competency features refer to the minimum ability requirements, which are necessary to ensure the success of work (Luo Yaoping, 2008).

Peer counselling has a certain scope for assessing competence. The training time of peer counselors is short, the ability to evaluate problems is limited, and the consultation and evaluation link is weak. The consultation work carried out without a good assessment may go beyond the scope of peer counseling. At the same time, peer counselors participate in different training programs and are good at solving different types of problems. It is often difficult to guarantee the consulting effect by undertaking consulting tasks outside the training programs, and delay the best time for consulting may even bring risks.

In terms of professional consulting supervision, supervision is a necessary training program for consultants. Through professional supervision, the consultant can not only receive guidance and advice, but also be monitored to avoid getting involved and other issues that have a negative impact on both parties. At present, China lacks supervisory ethics, relevant laws, regulations and industry norms, and there is no mature reward and punishment mechanism (You Linyu, Jia Xiaoming, 2014). Peer psychological counselors in colleges and universities are generally held by graduate students in the department of psychology, and the training method is generally lecturing, and the lack of internship under the guidance of professional consultants or supervisors often makes peer counselors frustrated in actual combat. In addition, due to funding, time, energy and other reasons, the supervision of many full-time consultants in colleges and universities is still difficult to guarantee, and the supervision needs of peer counselors are even more difficult to meet. In many colleges and universities, there are no supervision, less supervision and non-professional staff to undertake supervision work.

In terms of values, psychological counseling advocates value neutrality, respect for personal value, consciousness and other aspects of freedom, but absolute neutrality can not be achieved in practice. Studies have shown that the working time is negatively correlated with the tendency of consultants to provide value guidance and value indoctrination (Yu Miao, 2014). Peer counselors engage in consulting work for a short time, usually lack of experience, authority, which makes it difficult to grasp the value of participation.

4. IMPROVE THE APPROACHES AND METHODS OF PEER PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING ON ETHICAL ISSUES

4.1. Enhance professional competence

The competence of counselors has a stable influence on ethical decision-making. Referring to the three-factor competency model proposed by scholars (Song Chuanying, Qin Qiwen, 2017) and the six-factor model (Ding Fangsheng, 2015), etc., the training of peer counselors based on

the constituent elements of competency can effectively improve their competency and positively affect ethical decision-making.

First of all, improve the corresponding peer counselor training and supervision. At present, the quality of peer counseling carried out by colleges and universities is uneven, one of the reasons is that the training and follow-up supervision levels of colleges and universities are different. In the future, it is necessary to establish a unified training system through industry associations or work alliances, including training content, training form, frequency, number of participants and other related requirements that meet the psychological characteristics of Chinese college students. Initially master the ethics of psychological counseling, and better guide peer counselors to carry out psychological helping activities. The training content may include the ethical code of psychological counseling, the professionalism and professional competence of psychological counselors, the ethical principles involved in confidentiality issues, the ethical standards of informed consent, and the ethical issues in psychological testing and evaluation (Liu Jie, 2019).

Secondly, ethics should be incorporated into the assessment and evaluation system, the supervision and management system should be improved, the inner potential and enthusiasm of peer counselors should be mobilized, and the ethical norms should be deeply rooted in people's hearts and infiltrated into counseling through independent learning and other means. The evaluation, supervision, encouragement and guidance of regular supervision are beneficial to prevent the deviation of personal cognition and the solidification of thinking of peer psychological counselors. Under the professional supervision, it helps them to reflect on the shortcomings of professional knowledge and skills and work service, use resources to solve their own puzzles, and promote their self-exploration and self-realization.

Finally, promote the self-growth of peer counselors. Studies have shown that social interaction group counseling can significantly improve the interpersonal communication and coordination level of peer counselors (Li Junqing, Luo Subing, Chen Xiaoneng, 2017). By using group counseling to design resilience group activities, the resilience of group members has been significantly improved (Xu Jing, Yang Xiujun, 2016). Focusing on mental health knowledge and self-quality improvement of peer psychological backbone, special training on skills and methods of peer psychological counselors will be carried out, and interest skills training and self-quality improvement training of peer psychological counselors will be carried out in different categories (Lv Boyi, Zhao Zhijun, Ren Linlin, 2021). Such as theory teaching, classroom observation, case analysis, heart-to-heart talk, situational experience, salon discussion, subtle training, practical exercise. In short, try various ways to promote the self-improvement of peer psychological counselors, realize self-help and help others, and finally achieve self-growth, which indirectly improves the effectiveness of peer psychological counseling.

4.2. Develop applicable ethical standards

The ethics of peer counseling in colleges and universities mostly draw on the ethics of professional psychological counseling, ignoring the differences between the two. Peer counselling is not a professional service, is usually free, and accountability in the event of negative outcomes is difficult (Zakaria, 2007). Therefore, it is imperative to formulate a universal ethical norm of psychological counseling in colleges and universities.

In addition, for the same ethical problem, different theoretical norms and moral norms may lead to different results. The ethical issues in peer counseling are complex and varied, and there are dilemmas. A single ethical code cannot cover all the issues, and the issues need to be analyzed in a more compatible and rich framework. When it comes to situations outside ethical norms or conflicts between norms, ethical principles can be used to make judgments; When ethical principles conflict, the advantages and disadvantages should be weighed from the perspective of caring ethics theory. The peer counseling ethical framework built by Karen

Kitchener's ethical three-level superposition model can be used for reference, which is both extensive and flexible (Vincent, 2013), thus providing strong support for peer psychological counselors to identify and analyze ethical issues.

5. SUMMARY AND PROSPECT

Mental health education in colleges and universities has been paid more and more attention by the state, schools and students, and the ethical problems need to be solved in time. Among them, peer psychological counseling is the innovation of mental health education in colleges and universities, and the understanding and support from peers are the real needs of individuals, which is conducive to enriching the psychological education model in colleges and universities, promoting the formation of the consciousness of "helping others and helping themselves", and improving the effectiveness of mental health education in college students. Peer psychological counselors in colleges and universities should actively deal with many problems brought by ethics in their work and follow the law of students' physical and mental growth. In future studies, we should further explore the selection and training mechanism of peer psychological counselors, the content and form of psychological counseling activities, and improve the practical operation of peer psychological counseling. In the period of rapid development of the Internet and the trend of normalization of the epidemic, the ethical norms of online peer psychological counseling should also be developed and improved.

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