

Chinese University Professors' Perceptions about Counseling Services

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, the rapid growth in China's economy has generated radical changes in the Chinese society. The availability of counseling services was brought to the attention of educators in public schools and universities to resolve present-day challenges. Since counseling is considered to be a Western practice, little is known about the popularity of counseling services in universities in China. In addition, no research has been conducted to glean the opinions of counseling services from Chinese university professors. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of university professors in China on counseling services provided for students on campus. Seven professors from various disciplines were interviewed individually about their perceptions of counseling services on a university campus. Several themes emerged such as stressors of university students, coping strategies of university students, and ambivalence toward counseling services. The themes helped to explore the values and beliefs about counseling, and the stress and coping strategies of Chinese students from the perceptions of seven university professors.

Keywords: Counseling; stress; coping strategies; college students in China, college professors in China

Chinese University Professors' Perceptions about Counseling Services

Over the past three decades, the rapid growth in China's economy has provided ample opportunities for international exchange and as a result, the Chinese society has undergone radical changes (e.g., Qian, Yao, & Rodriguez, 2009). Many modern Chinese cities have become more Westernized, which has been caused by a process of acculturation to Western values (e.g., Kwan, 2009). People in China, the youth of the new generation in particular, have had to adjust to all the societal changes and the influence of the Western viewpoints. In the meantime, the needs for counseling and psychotherapy services and the demand for experienced counselors have increased (e.g., Qian et al., 2009). Counseling services were brought to the attention of educators in public schools and university settings as a tool to help to resolve present-day challenges in the changing societal environment of China.

History of Counseling and Psychotherapy in China

The theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy were introduced to China from Europe and the United States as early as 1910 (e.g., Qian et al., 2011). In 1916, Tsinghua University in Beijing began work in the field, and later on in 1923, it established the first vocational guidance committee (e.g., Sun & Yuen, 2012). This is

recognized as the beginning of career counseling in China.

Unfortunately, the development of counseling was abruptly terminated at the beginning of World War II (e.g., Qian et al., 2011). With the initiation of the People's Republic of China after 1949 and the strong influence of the Soviet government, little progress in the field of counseling was made in China. The practice of counseling and psychotherapy was further exacerbated during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1967. Practitioners, mostly scientists, were publicly criticized and treated with hostility (e.g., Portnoy, 2013; Qian et al., 2011). The economic reform in 1976 eventually launched the rapid development of Western ideology and elevated the role of counseling and renewed emphasis on psychology (e.g., Qian et al., 2011). All prominent theories of counseling and psychotherapy were again brought into the Chinese community, and local practitioners applied counseling services widely. Sun and Yuen (2012) stated that counseling services have been evolving drastically since 2000. This has been evident in the implementation of nationwide new policies, the expansion of training curriculum, and the research and publishing of teaching materials of counseling. As a result of this expeditious movement, multiple sites across various provinces in China have begun to provide counseling services within universities, public schools, hospitals, and professional centers. Portnoy (2013) concluded that there is currently an acute need for

well-trained mental health counselors in China, although the field of counseling is still in its preliminary stage.

The Present Need and Development of Counseling Services

Counseling and psychology have increasingly been recognized as pertinent and rightful disciplines in many Chinese regions, including Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China (e.g., Leung & Chen, 2015). Qian et al. (2011) reported that counseling services in modern China have rapidly become more available across the nation in the last decade.

At present, counseling is still considered in its elementary stage in China since the majority of counseling models are from foreign countries, and most local publications were written only after 2004 (e.g., Sun & Yuen, 2012). Researchers in China are working on contextualizing counseling theories and strategies to make them more compatible with the Eastern culture and to meet the needs of unique situations in China (e.g., Sun & Yuen, 2012). There has been a charge to create, develop, and implement the indigenous theory, practice, and research of counseling as a solution to the contemporary challenges and fast growth of China (e.g., Leung & Chen, 2015; Sun & Yuen, 2012). Portnoy (2013) indicated that there are conflictual forces both culturally and structurally that both support and constrain the progression of counseling. Socioeconomic development and regional differences have significantly influenced the development of

counseling services, and the lack of resources in some rural areas restrains the growth of counseling services (e.g., Qian et al., 2011).

According to Wong, Xuesong, Poon, and Lam (2012), massive economic and social changes in China have impacted family structure, work environment, social and interpersonal relationships. Chinese people, especially those who live in big cities, experience enormous stress due to job competition, work performance demands, and the desire for a higher standard of living. Consequently, depression and other psychological issues have become more common among city dwellers (e.g., Wong et al., 2012). A study by Zhao, Li, Zhao, Zhao, and Stanton (2013) found depressive symptoms among children in rural areas in China. The lack of knowledge and understanding of mental illnesses has kept people from seeking counseling or other appropriate mental health services. To make the matter worse, many patients were misdiagnosed and their psychosomatic problems were treated only as physical symptoms by physicians (e.g., Wong et al., 2012).

Wang, Ni, Ding, and Yi (2015) suggested that the changes in society have caused perplexing mental health issues and stress to families, children, and schools. Since most Chinese highly value education, academic pressure is to be found among school students. Hence, the development of school counseling services is desperately needed.

However, teachers, parents, and students lack of understanding of the role of counselors, and this has a negative effect on the employment of counseling services. Because of the negative social stigma attached to the counseling services and because of the shortage of competent counseling professionals, students with mental health challenges find it difficult to access professional counselors (e.g., Wang et al., 2015).

Sun and Yuen (2012) advocated that various forms of counseling services should become more available in universities since such services are beneficial to students as well as the society. On the other hand, the national policy of expanding university enrollments has impacted the job market negatively and created problems for university students. Students who graduated from universities have faced severe employment difficulties since there are not enough job opportunities for every graduate. The stresses caused by fruitless job searches have created personal problems and anxiety for many college graduates leading to an augmented need for counseling services (e.g., Sun & Yuen, 2012).

While working with university students in Nanjing China, Portnoy (2013) observed that many students were so starved for advice and information regarding their personal problems that they were willing to share personal details in front of a few hundred people in a public area. Portney (2013) asserted, "I was shocked when a steady stream of

students met with me...[for] 3 hours, during which time I saw over 25 students with a variety of concerns" (p. 112). In addition, Portnoy (2013) commented with surprise that mental health issues such as eating disorders were ignored whereas diverse sexual orientation, such as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender were still considered pathological. In general, people in China have limited knowledge or awareness of the definition of mental health and mental illnesses.

Wang et al. (2015) reported that the theory and practice of counseling and psychology developed primarily in Western countries centers and were based on individualistic values, competition, and personal responsibility. On the contrary, Chinese culture focuses on collectivistic values, harmony, and respect and consideration toward others. Kwan (2009) concurred that conflicts between collectivism based on the Confucian philosophy as opposed to Western individualism occur at both the societal and individual levels. Virtues taught by Confucius remain the dominant Chinese belief system and anchor the personal and interpersonal relationships in Chinese communities. Kwan (2009) also stated that some compromises or integration of the individualistic and the collectivistic values will be required to make counseling effective in China.

The Training of Professional Counselors in China

Portnoy (2013) reported that there is presently a strong demand for well-trained

counselors and other mental health professionals in China. In most cases, counselors are poorly trained or ill suited for their positions. Wang et al. (2015) agreed that there is a blatant deficiency of training for counselors. Many counselors only have a bachelor's degree, and some have master's degree; however, their degrees may not necessarily be in counseling or psychology. Even those who have received training in the mental health discipline have only been taught theories; no practical or experiential training was required. Wang et al. (2015) concluded that these counselors are at a loss when working at the college counseling center and must consult with students who are experiencing severe life issues.

University and school counselors seem to have dead-end jobs; there is little power and status in these positions and no room for advancement (e.g., Portnoy, 2013; Wang et al., 2015). Many counselors, therefore, seek teaching appointments as university professors and teach academic courses. As a result, university counselors do not have the necessary commitment to their careers. University counselors see very few clients and even if they do see clients, their appointments are not set on a regular and consistent basis (e.g., Portnoy, 2013).

Another problem in China is that there is no licensure for mental health professionals; a person can become a counselor by passing a relatively easy

examination without any academic training and practice in the field (e.g., Portnoy, 2013). According to Portnoy (2013), a new policy supports the idea that counselors should obtain more counseling credentials, yet this policy has not been widely recognized. New counselors are also encouraged to gain clinical experience through 100 hours of supervision from a more qualified, credentialed supervisor (e.g., Portnoy 2013; Wang et al. 2015). However, there are only approximately 120 qualified supervisors in a country of 1.3 billion people; it is difficult or almost impossible to gain access to an experienced supervisor. According to Wang et al. (2015) even if new counselors are open and willing to receive supervision, the process can only be done in lecture or seminar format with hundreds of counselors at one time.

In 2012, the Ministry of Education required each elementary and high school to employ one full time or part time counselor for mental health education (e.g., Wang et al., 2015). Many teachers are motivated to become school counselors by obtaining the mental health counselor certificate through a written examination. On the other hand, neither requirement for practicum or supervision nor a degree in counseling or psychology is necessary. Because of the inadequate training of school counselors, students lack both trust in their counselors and their ability to solve difficult cases; these are two negative consequences resulting from lack of qualified counselor training (e.g.,

Wang et al., 2015).

Qian et al. (2011) stated that the Chinese Ministry of Labor and Social Security specified the guidelines for qualification of professional counselors in 2001 and held the first qualifying examination in 2003. Guidelines to implement a certification examination for counselors began to develop gradually. Qian and his colleagues proposed three current challenges in the field of counseling. First, there is an incompatible ratio between practitioners and client population. Two million counselors are needed to meet the challenge of 1.3 billion people in the nation. Second, there is a lack of systematic training in counseling to cope with complicated client cases. There is no specific clinical training and degree requirement for counselors, and the quality of present personnel is questionable. Third, there is no professional regulation, management and development of professional counseling, and there is not a regulatory body to monitor and oversee the skills and proficiency of counselors (e.g., Qian et al., 2011). Qian et al. (2011) concluded that uneven development in this field is evident across various regions, and therefore it is difficult to measure the quality of the counseling services.

Wang et al. (2015) studied the role of counselors in public schools in China and stated that teachers played an essential role in channeling students toward counseling services. Since school teachers interact with students on a daily basis, they make the

referrals to the counselors in school. Therefore, teachers' knowledge and understanding of the available counseling services is imperative so that they may aid those students who need those services (e.g., Wang et al., 2015). By the same token, when university professors and advisors are in weekly contact with their students, their perceptions and awareness of the counseling services can have a strong impact on students' mental health. Since the availability of counseling and other benefits available to students may be new concepts for the teaching faculty, the counselors' referrals are mostly dependent upon faculty recommendations. Wang et al. (2015) stated that little is known whether students in universities of China are using counseling services since there has not been any research conducted to understand the services. In addition, there are no research studies found concerning the opinions of counseling from the viewpoint of Chinese university faculty.

Methodology

Since limited empirical studies were found in the area of counseling services in China, this research is designed to be a phenomenological study. The purpose of the study is to explore the Chinese university professors' perceptions toward counseling services that are provided to students on campus. Participants, data collection, and data analysis are described and included for this investigation.

Participants

The participants of this study were selected using criterion sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods. The main objective is to focus on the perceptions of university professors toward counseling services in China. Seven faculty members from different disciplines were interviewed individually about their perceptions and recommendations for campus counseling services. The seven participants were faculty from a university located in the central area of China. All participants had been teaching in the same university from eleven to twenty-five years. Two participants had Masters' of Arts degrees, and five participants had Doctor of Philosophy degrees; all degrees are corresponding to their field of discipline. Two participants were from the College of Education, three from the College of Urban and Environmental Sciences, and two from the College of Foreign Languages. Three participants were Assistant Professors, two were Associate Professors, and two were Full Professors. Six participants were male, and one female participant. Regarding participants' age, one was 30-35 years old, two were 35-40 years old, three were 40-45 years old, and one was 45-50 years old.

Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participating professors and were conducted in a clear, direct, and consistent manner. Both authors of

this research designed the interview questions. The clarity and appropriateness of the interview questions were then examined and approved by five experts in the field of counseling. All five of them are professional counselors with either master's or doctoral degrees. In addition, a pilot study was conducted to ensure fluency and smoothness of the interview process. The first author interviewed all seven participating professors at a convenient location near their university. The five interview questions focused on the professors' perceptions of college student stress and coping skills, the professors' knowledge and of counseling services, and the training of counselors in China. The five interview questions are as follows:

1. What kinds of stress, if any, do students in your university experience?
2. How do students cope with their stress? And will you recommend the students to seek counseling services on campus?
3. What is your knowledge and understanding of the counseling services on your campus?
4. What is your knowledge and understanding of the training requirement of counselors?
5. What are your expectations if/when you refer students to counselors on campus?

Question one was designed to understand the current stressors of Chinese college students. Question two was designed to understand students' coping strategies and the faculty's recommendations for counseling. Questions three, four, and five were designed to inquire, from university professors' perspectives, about the knowledge and understanding of counseling services, the counseling process, and counseling training requirements.

The first author interviewed each participant for about twenty minutes, and each interview was tape-recorded. After the interviews, both authors transcribed the interviews verbatim in Chinese and then translated them into English. Both authors received their Ph.D. degrees in counseling in the U.S., and both of them are fluent in Chinese and English languages. The authors' educational and cultural backgrounds and their fluency in both languages provide them the necessary tools to interpret the answers of the Chinese professors to the utmost accuracy and originality. Thus, the meaning of the content was captured accurately for this research.

Data Analysis

Huberman and Miles (1994) derived a set of tactics for data analysis and generating meaning to (a) observe if there are any patterns and themes, (b) use intuitive sense, (c) see connections between groups of data, (d) integrate diverse pieces of data,

(e) compare by clustering and distinguishing observations, (f) factor, and (g) make conceptual/theoretical coherence, typically through comparison with the referent constructs in the literature. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) stated that “analysis involves working with data, organizing them, breaking them in to manageable units, synthesizing, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 157).

With the consent of the seven interviewees, all interviews were audio taped, the data were collected, and then transcribed verbatim into Mandarin, then translated verbatim into English. The transcribed and translated data were analyzed by taking the following steps suggested by McLeod (2011), who has researched several important phenomenological researchers.

Step 1: Collect verbal or written protocols describing the experience.

Step 2: Read them through carefully to get a sense of the whole.

Step 3: Extract significant statements.

Step 4: Eliminate irrelevant repetitions, discarding statement “not revelatory of the phenomenon”

Step 5: Identify the central themes or meanings implicit in these statements.

Step 6: Integrate these meanings into a single “exhaustive description” of the

phenomenon.

(p. 89)

In order to increase the trustworthiness of the study, these themes were triangulated from both the commentaries and the data obtained from the focus groups. Additionally, themes emerging from the data were compared to the existing literature.

Results

Three major themes were identified from the data analysis: (a) stressors of university students, (b) copying strategies of university students, (c) and ambivalence toward counseling services. The stressors experienced by university students that were reported by the participating professors were further examined under three sub-themes. The stressors were (a) academic problems, (b) financial problems, and (c) interpersonal problems. Regarding coping strategies of university students, two sub-themes emerged (a) suppression and isolation, and (b) limited support network. The theme ambivalence toward counseling services brought out three sub-themes (a) the lack of understanding of the counseling services, (b) indecisiveness on recommendation, and (c) expectations of quality professional services. Some exemplary quotes by participants are listed to demonstrate the tone of discourse in the order in which they were interviewed.

Academic problems

All participants identified academic problems as the first and the most critical sub-theme during the interviews. Many contributing factors were discussed to bring those problems to light. Some students felt very overwhelmed with university life, and they did not have the skills and the capability to manage their daily activities. Participants also described the source of students' academic problems as being born in the Millennial Generation. For instance, participant 1 stated, "students, especially those who were born in the 90s, are not really motivated to learn, and some of them are not prepared for academic work at the university." Participant 2 lamented that college students in this age are not prepared for independent living, "college students in the Millennial Generation have no idea about lives in general. They don't have a clear vision for the future either. They are confused and stressed about everything." Participant 6 noted, "some students are just weak and they failed in many subject areas. After struggling for a while, they just gave up because they don't believe they can make it through college." Participant 7 commented, "we tried to offer additional help and tutoring for those who have academic problems, but they have to take responsibility and be self-motivated. Some students just don't have it in them." Overall, the participants agreed that students' academic problems were related to a lack of motivation, responsibility, and a clear vision for the future, as

well as a sense of maladjustment when surviving university life.

Financial Problems

Since working a part-time job to pay for a college degree is uncommon in China, most university students rely solely on their parents' financial provision. This can be a major challenge for students coming from low-income families. They look for financial aid and scholarship opportunities from school and the government, but these resources are very limited. Financial problems bring worries and tensions to these students. Participant 2 explained their plight, "students from low-income families are not able to afford tuitions for their college studies. We do have scholarships to supplement for these students, however students have to meet certain criteria to receive scholarships." Additionally, participant 5 reported, "our school and the government provide certain kind of scholarships, but the supplies are very limited. They are not easy to obtain, and thus it adds stress and helplessness to the students from families of low social economic status." Overall, financial problems are a potential stressor for students, especially those from low income families.

Interpersonal Problems

Interpersonal problems are the third sub-theme regarding stressors of university students. Four participants attributed these problems to the "One Child Policy" in China

(e.g., Feng, Dudley L, & Wang, 2014). Most children in China grow up as the only child in the family since having more than one child is a violation of the government's policy and can be heavily penalized. Children are given all the attention from parents, and some are even spoiled by parents or grandparents. Hence, Chinese children have little opportunity to learn social skills at home and have difficulties with communication and problem solving with others. Participant 3 remarked, "some students have trouble making and keeping friends. I think our government's One Child Policy has a lot to do with this. They seem more egotistic or self-centered and they have low tolerance of differences."

Participant 5 was concerned with their interpersonal skills, "problems getting along with others are very obvious for some students. They isolate themselves even though they share a dorm room with their roommates. Some don't even want to share a room with another students during field trips out of the city. They would rather pay more to have a single room but the school policy does not allow that kind of behavior." In general, the lack of social interaction at a young age may be a contributing factor for students' interpersonal problems at university.

Suppression and Isolation

University students in China seem to have inadequate coping strategies and their support network is also very limited. Participants stated that some university students

withdraw from any social activities and live very isolated lives among their peers. When problems arise, these students tend to suppress their emotions. They avoid and retreat from the problems and do not actively look for a solution. They appear sad or depressed and have low energy. Surfing the internet is one of their ways to escape reality, and some students will isolate themselves for days without attending classes. Participant 3 stated, "I hope we can offer some of these students training in communication and problem solving skills. They have a tendency to isolate themselves and keep their thoughts to themselves when problems come." Participant 7 agreed, "I have seen students appearing sad and troubled. When I approach them, 'I'm fine' is the common response I get." According to participants, suppression and isolation seem to be common coping mechanisms among college students.

Limited Support Network

After students exhaust their own coping strategies, they will try to seek guidance from parents, close friends, academic advisors, and professors. However, their resources are very limited. Students turn to their support network only when they are in crises. The advisors and professors become students' parents, mentors, and counselors. Participants believe these problems have to do with the One Child Policy. According to Participant 2, "these students have limited support system. They don't share their

problems unless they are desperate. Their advisors and professors become their counselors when they need help." Participant 7 commented, "the academic advisor and the professors offer frontline of help to students. They are the substitute parents of the students on campus."

Lack of Understanding of Counseling Services

Four participants reported that they had no knowledge about the process of counseling. Only two of the participants could describe the procedures and the duration of the services. One participant did not even know there was a counseling center on campus. Regarding training requirements for counselors, most participants had very vague ideas. They mentioned a certification examination, hours of clinical practice, and degree in counseling or psychology in the discussion. Participant 2 admitted no knowledge of counseling services, "I don't know if we have a counseling center. I know counselors are required in public schools. Counselors should at least have a master's degree in counseling or psychology." Participant 3 said, "I know there is a certification examination for the general public if one wants to become a counselor, but I'm not very sure about this." Participant 4 could explain the services in limited detail, "based on my understanding, counselors work with students individually and put them in groups. Sometimes, counselors may take one or two days to resolve the student's problems." In

general, university faculty have a lack of understanding of counseling services. As a result, faculty are incapable of recommending counseling services to students.

Indecisiveness about Recommendations

Five participants stated that they would recommend counseling for those students dealing with stress. Two participants did not think students need counseling and believed that professors carry the responsibility to help students academically and personally. Participants had open and positive attitudes toward counseling, but only one out of seven had actually referred students to counseling in the past. There were some questions about the trustworthiness and professionalism of counselors. Moreover, the school or the government did not encourage counseling services. On one hand, most participants held positive viewpoints toward counseling since the services can be a great resource for students. On the other hand, the negative social stigma of counseling and the cultural distrust of the services kept them from advocating for the services. One participant suggested that counseling is only for psychiatric problems. Participant 1 explained the stigma, "we do have counseling in our school, but counseling is not encouraged in our country. There may be more resources in big cities like Shanghai or Beijing to establish professional counseling services." Participant 3 had little positive comments to add, "the counseling services are not very professional and I don't think the

services match up with students' emotional problems and development." However, according to Participant 7, "every teacher should be a counselor. From the traditional Chinese culture, teachers play a significant role as a mentor or guidance in students' personal and academic development." Overall, participants had contradictory opinions on counseling services and their benefits, therefore, they were hesitant to recommend counseling services to students.

Expectations of quality professional services

High expectations were placed upon the counselors as well as the counseling services. The participants agreed that counselors should be genuine, caring, empathic, insightful, trustworthy, and demonstrate outstanding professional and work ethics. They should acquire the ability to listen and solve problems. Participants expected students to have the opportunity to manage their problems in an adult fashion and gain new perspectives and motivation in order to focus on their studies again. One participant even suggested that the quality of services should not be lower than that of a physician's office. Participant 4 hoped that students would benefit, "when I refer students to counseling, I expect students can improve their psychological status and emotional condition. Eventually, they can have a more optimistic attitude." Participant 6 felt that "a counselor should be honest and genuine and maintain professional ethics and work

ethics at all time.” Participant 7 said, “the setting should be very professional and confidentiality should be maintained at all cost.” In general, participants had high expectations of the quality of counseling services.

Counseling Applications

In a collectivistic culture like that of the Chinese, university professors play significant roles in their students' lives. They are respected and considered to be parents, mentors, advisors, counselors, and even lifesavers from students' views. In such a context, college professors' perceptions of the counseling services will influence students' understanding of counseling and their decisions on whether counseling is an option in coping with life challenges. University professors are often the first contact students reach out to when they face various obstacles and are in need of guidance and assistance. Thus, it can be tremendously helpful if professors have better knowledge about counseling and are willing to team with college counselors to provide more professional mental health services to college students in China. However, the college professors' lack of accurate understanding of counseling services may hinder the promotion of services. Misconceptions about counseling and a counselor's role may potentially result in their misinforming those students who are in need of counseling services. For example, professors tend to play the role of counselor and offer their

advice to their students instead of referring students to the counseling center, as is indicated in the data of literature review and the interviews from our participants.

From the findings of the study, we came to a realization that the lack of understanding of counseling is prevalent in the Chinese college environment. Even the most knowledgeable populations in China, college professors, have limited knowledge of counseling services; as a result, professional counselors still have a long way to go in developing and promoting their mental health services.

Conclusion

Chinese college students face unique challenges in their college lives. Many of them, coming from one-child families, have not developed interpersonal skills and a good support system when dealing with all kinds of stressors. One coping skill they use is to isolate themselves in the virtual internet world and avoid dealing with reality. College professors are charged with the serious responsibility of identifying these troubled students and providing them with personal attention and guidance during crisis situations. It is understood that these phenomena have existed in college settings in China for a long time. Professional counseling services are a new idea yet to be promoted to both college students and professors as an alternative that should be considered.

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