

Discussions on Application of Narrative Therapy in Building College Students' Positive Psychology

Zhiwei Wang^{1,*}, Xin Quan², Xingdong Wang¹

¹Department of Communication, College of Communication, Shenzhen Polytechnic, Shenzhen 518000, Guangdong, China

²Department of Family Therapy, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale 31400, Florida, the U.S

*wangzhiwei@szpt.edu.cn

Abstract

Cultivating college students' positive psychology can benefit students in many aspects ranging from raising their learning interests to helping their future career development, but the number of discussing practical skills for building college students' positive psychology is relatively small. This paper introduces and discusses narrative therapy and philosophical perspectives behind the narrative approach. Three different philosophical schools and how they influence the skill in the practice of building students' positive psychology have been examined and discussed in this paper. This paper is not only valuable in having a deeper understanding of the application of pragmatic skills in building students' positive psychology, but it also allows an insightful review of how philosophical ideas contribute to the educational psychology field.

Keywords

positive psychology, student management, narrative therapy, psychological education.

1. Introduction

Positive psychology is an emerging but relatively hot research direction that focuses on the generalization of the factors leading people to success [1]. The effectiveness and constructive influences of positive psychology on Chinese college students have been well explored and discussed by many scholars [2]. College students with positive attitudes are more likely to succeed in their future career development [3]. However, there are only a handful of papers focusing on the introduction of the means of building Chinese students' psychology. The goal of this paper aims to contribute to the literature by discussing narrative therapy, one of the most common approaches applied in college student management. Narrative therapy has been first brought up in 1990 when Michael White and David Epston published the book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* [4]. Since then, the narrative approach as a means to help solve the psychological problems of people has been gradually accepted in the practice of therapy. In the development of narrative therapy, some key social theories have tremendously informed the premises of the narrative approach and the practice of narrative therapy in building college students' positive psychology. Three key social theories, Constructivism, Social Constructionism, and Post-structuralism, and how these theories help have a deeper understanding of students' psychological activities through the narrative approach are introduced, analyzed, and discussed in this paper.

2. Constructivism

Maturana and Varela (1991) described that the world we live in is constructed on the biological rules of perception and cognition. Thus, they further argued that since human perception was transformed into biological information of reality, there is no way to get to the eternal true reality [5]. Hoffman (1990) described that constructivists believe that Constructs of people are always shaped and reshaped as in the nature the organism evolves a fit with its environment, and that the construction of ideas about the world takes place in a nervous system that operates something like a blind person checking out the room [6]. He used an interesting example to explain his idea. He said, the walker in the dark who doesn't bump into a tree cannot say whether he is in a wood or a field, only that he has avoided bashing his head. Although Jill and Combs (1996) argued that we are prisoners of our perception, constructivism has informed the development of the technique of narrative therapy of the Unique Outcome. White (2007) indicated, the premise of the Unique Outcome is that the whole experience of life is highly rich, but people, according to the capacity of our sensory and perception function, can only be able to capture a small portion of it. Then, the rest but the majority part of our lived experience has been sifted through, becoming the "out of phase" of the dominant stories and not being retained well [7]. This notion is aligned with the idea of constructivism that our take-away message from our environment is dependent on our biological function of perception and cognition. However, the "not-known" of our lived experience may contain significant information that speaks differently than the dominant stories and can be an entry to constituting an alternative storyline. The unique outcome can be developed to discover the "not-known" of experiences of college students and integrate it to initiate an alternative storyline that served for alternative meaning. Helping college students to develop their alternative storyline is an efficient approach to building students' positive psychology. An open-up mind is a typical feature of students with positive attitudes. The alternative storyline allows students to re-check their own stories and analyze their experiences from the other side of the case. Through the process of scrutinizing their personal experiences from different views, they can gradually broaden their mind and move to a healthier psychology one step forward. The length of cultivating students' alternative storyline could be relatively long and there may be some back and forth steps in the growth process. Some college students may not realize the importance of fostering an alternative storyline in developing positive psychology. Some students may stick closely to their past experiences and would not take the first step to embrace the new perspective. Therefore, it takes a lot of effort and time from teachers and student advisors. Also, many communication skills have to be applied in the teaching process such as reflective listening[8]. After receiving the information of message senders, information receivers repeat what they hear to message senders to make sure that they have 100 percent understand the points of the conversations and stories. The message senders can check if listeners miss any important information. The process is called reflective listening. Reflective listening can not only allow a more smooth story-telling process, but it can also reduce misunderstandings between student storytellers and teachers.

3. Social Constructionism

Social constructionists hold different worldviews about reality. Instead of Constructivism's thought of seeing reality as non-achievable truth, social Constructionism holds the postmodern view that believes that realities are socially constructed. They argue that realities are constituted through language, realities are organized and maintained through narrative, and there are no essential truths[9]. Hoffman (1990) favors social Constructionism over Constructivism because it posits an evolving set of meanings that emerge unendingly from the interactions between people. These meanings are not skull-bound and may not exist inside

what we think of as an individual "mind". They are part of a general flow of constantly changing narratives. Jill and Combs also indicated that narrative therapy is developed base on Pare's worldview about the reality that knowledge arises within communities of knowers. They stressed that the realities people inhabit are those people who negotiate with one another. Gergen (2009) further elaborated on social constructionism. He believes we live in a world of meaning, and we make sense of the environment by attaching different meanings to various things through interacting with others. In this sense, people co-created the world of meaning together and take the preferred reality to shape their own identity. Then people continue to act and interact based on the guidance of what they believe who they are, and what they should do[10].

Social constructionism plays a critical role in having a deeper understanding of students' narratives that reflect their worldviews and personal experiences. With narrative therapy, college students are offered chances to share their individual stories. In the narrative sharing process, college students and teachers can develop their cooperative relationships together. The role of teachers in the narrative approach is not an expert, but a friend who can show respect to students' past experiences. As the role of teachers shifts from a "teacher" to a friend, the responsibility of teachers also changes accordingly. In the story-telling process, teachers do not only need to emphasize the past successful experiences of students, but they also have to detect special meanings and strong emotions attached to students' stories. These meanings and strong emotions sometimes can be keys leading to solutions for the psychological problems of students. Moreover, teachers have to guide students to re-evaluate the problems that they face. In the guiding process, teachers and students are collaboratively making meanings of the case. After students have a different thought to the problem that they face, they are more likely to change their behaviors for reaching a better solution. College students do not generate "a different thought" by themselves, they have to be navigated and be guided through a collaborative meaning-making process with their teachers to the thought.

4. Post-structuralism and Michel Foucault

The dominant position of power with its enormous influences on the knowledge proposed by Michel Foucault have been highlighted and discussed by many scholars. Michel Foucault was a French intellectual who claimed himself as a historian with historically systematic thoughts. Foucault (1965) indicated that social power has been forcing the dominant discourse on society as a method of social control, so the truth is defined by power and authority. In addition, objectification of people's bodies through the disorders within the body has fostered the objectification of people's identity. The nature of culture also plays a role in internalizing the problems, driving people to believe that the problem in their lives can reflect their own identity or character. White and Epston carried out one of Foucault's main arguments, "a person is not the problem but the problem is the problem"[11]. They developed the narrative technique of externalizing conversation, which could be seen as the counter-practice of objectifying people's identity. When the problem is separated from the person, the person can take a more objective position to look at the problem. When people are unraveled from the negative identity of their life, the possibility of taking action to address the problem becomes available. Other than externalizing the problem from themselves, people holding the negativity to their own identity or life can barely get out of the predicament by themselves. Through externalizing the problems in conversations, people would be able to identify where and how the larger environment has forced the negativity into their identity. The mechanism of externalizing problems goes along with Gergen's argument about social theory, which argues that meaning-making in human society is a co-action process. When people attach meaning to their lives, people act along with this meaning, as human behaviors are guided by the meanings they hold to our identity.

Post-structuralism lays a solid theoretical foundation for the development of the narrative approach. In student management, many college students are entangled with their negative feelings and past experiences and would not take a new step forward. The rationale of the externalizing process is to help college students separate them from the issues, emotions and environment. The narrative approach provides students suffering from psychological problems with opportunities to share their stories, so college teachers can help students extract their negative experiences from students themselves and thus address the causing factors of their negative psychological emotions. It needs to point out that the narrative approach that absorbed part of post-structuralism ideas is not one track communication method. The process of externalizing the core factors causing negative emotions in students is a mutually collaborative approach, calling for efforts of both students and teachers. Although students are the main role, the storytellers, the teachers also have to contribute their experiences and knowledge to help students re-count key elements in their story. After the core elements in students' narratives are reorganized, students can have a deeper understanding of their past experiences and can learn a different angle to check their past experiences. With the new perspectives of analyzing problems, students are more likely to adopt a more positive attitude to deal with negative feelings caused by past negative experiences.

5. Conclusion

In the development of the narrative approach in building college students' positive psychology, many different philosophical schools contribute their distinctive perspectives and explanations that can help teachers better observe the psychological activities and worldviews of college students. This paper introduces three philosophical thoughts and discusses how these perspectives can help sharpen the skills of the narrative approach in practice. Although the narrative approach, as a practical skill in psychological education, has massively influenced by the above-discussed three schools, it does not mean that only three schools have impacted the narrative approach. Other theories and perspectives have also influenced the formation of narrative therapy. For example, the narrative approach also absorbed the concept of re-aggregation of members, the figures who belong to one's life story, one's prior selves, as well as significant others who are part of the story[12].

In conclusion, as the narrative approach hypothesizes that students are the real authors of their lives writing their own stories, it encourages students to enhance their psychological betterment by themselves. Up to date, in the research direction of building Chinese college students' positive psychology, there are not many papers focusing on practical skills. This paper fills the research gap by providing in-depth discussions of the narrative approach in improving students' positive psychology.

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