

School Counseling in China Today

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Abstract

This article provides a brief overview of the development of psychological thinking in China and social influences on the practice of school counseling today. Common problems of students are described, including anxiety due to pressure to perform well on exams, loneliness and social discomfort, and video game addiction. Counseling approaches used by school counselors today can include both traditional Chinese treatments like *qigong* and modern Western approaches like cognitive behavioral therapy. There is a great need for more school counselors, more training for counselors on modern counseling methods, and more efforts to reduce the stigma of seeking counseling. An understanding of how school counseling is practiced in China can increase the cultural awareness and sensitivity of American school counselors.

School Counseling in China Today

This paper provides an overview of how school counseling is practiced in China today, and areas where improvement is needed. Given the significance of cultural diversity in the counseling profession, and the rapidly increasing importance of China in today's world, school counselors in the U. S. cannot afford to be ignorant of how counseling is practiced in other cultures. Comparing counseling practices in the two countries can promote tolerance, and the cross-fertilization allows counselors in both countries to learn from each other.

The first author was a member of a group of faculty and students from Northern Arizona University who conducted a long study tour in China. Several locations in rural and urban areas were visited, including Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Qufu, and Xi'an. Many meetings were held with Chinese school counselors, mental health counselors, and psychologists to further our understanding of Chinese thinking about psychology and to trade information on counseling practice. The second author is a teacher and counselor who specializes in school counseling at Xi'an Shiyou University. This article includes an overview of counseling in China today and the impressions of the authors regarding counseling children and adolescents in China. Some of the statements in this paper reflect the observations and impressions of the authors rather than research findings, because no systematic research on school counseling in China has been published.

China has a long history of contributions to the study of human nature. The philosophers Confucius and Lao-Tzu proposed methods to promote the development of children into happy and responsible adults (Higgins & Zheng, 2002). Lao-Tzu's ideas

about balance and following the way of nature to fulfill one's potential influenced Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers (Jenni, 1999). The Chinese invented mental testing about 3,000 years ago, when the emperor used tests to measure the fitness of applicants for official positions in the government (Anastasi & Urbino, 1996). Tests measuring response speed, situational assessments, and interviews were used to assess mental abilities. Eventually test batteries were developed for civil service examinations, and the British government borrowed them for its own civil service in 1855 (Zhang, 1988). Later several European countries and the United States endorsed the Chinese system as modified by the English, and mental testing has been a major part of psychology ever since.

China has not always been open to psychology. Western psychology arrived in China in the early 20th century, and some psychology labs and societies were established, but this progress halted with the outbreak of World War II. When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949 the only approved psychology was Pavlovian behaviorism, due to the influence of the Soviet Union (Higgins & Zheng, 2002). Chairman Mao's government considered psychology a negative influence, since it emphasized individual differences instead of social cohesion, and Mao closed the country's psychology labs and university departments and exiled psychologists to remote rural areas to work on farms. Since Mao's Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, China has become much more open to outside influences, including European and American psychology (Jing, 1994).

Social policies in China have changed dramatically in the past 25 years. Although historically women were considered second-class citizens, today women have legal

equality. Forced marriage, bigamy, and child brides have been outlawed. Currently the vice president of China is a woman, and 46% of government officials are women, although most of them are low in the hierarchy. However, even today male children are preferred to females. Males are also preferred by employers; if there are two equally qualified applicants for a job, a male and a female, the male is almost certain to get the position (Zheng Xifeng, personal communication, July 12, 2006).

China's One-child Policy, which has been in effect in China since 1979, was intended to help the country deal with overpopulation. Birth control pills are free, and abortions are legal and free. Today most families in China have only one child, but there are some exceptions to the One-child Policy. For example, farm families in rural areas are allowed to have a second child if the first child had a disability which was not genetic; if the parents are both members of national minority groups; or if they live in a remote area where population growth is not a problem (Dong Hao, personal communication, July 12, 2006). Some wealthy families simply have more than one child and pay the fine (Liu, 2008a). As a result of many years of the One-child Policy, it is very common for children and teenagers in China to talk about being lonely due to not having siblings. This sense of loneliness often becomes acute in adolescence, and contributes to social anxiety and dating difficulties.

Although China has a long history of philosophical thinking about psychological issues, the country does not have a long history of empirically testing ideas. Historically a common explanation for mental illness was possession by evil spirits, and the afflicted consulted fortune-tellers, used incantations or talismans, visited Buddhist temples, or

sought spiritual healing. More recently mental disorders were (and in many cases still are) treated with medicinal herbs and deep breathing exercises (So, 2005).

China's past emphasis on examinations and mental testing still continues today. In the United States, almost every teenager can get into some college or university, but may face a considerable challenge in getting a good job after graduation. In China the situation is reversed; competition for a place in a university is intense, but almost everyone who enters university graduates. Only about 15% of Chinese adolescents attend university, but the graduation rate is about 99% (Jiang, 2007). Because parents know that obtaining a higher education is essential for their child to have a good career, they tend to place a lot of pressure on the child to study hard all through the lower grades. Exams are considered extremely important, and students sometimes feel that all that matters is their grades, rather than their emotional health or happiness. This emphasis on examinations is in part a result of the emphasis on testing in Chinese history, but it is also a result of the competitive pressure of having such a large population in the country. There are only so many good careers to be had, and exams help to reduce the number of applicants. As many as one-third of college graduates are unable to find a good job (Hou & Zhang, 2007).

China's rapid economic development and the pressure for high performance seem to have increased the rates of anxiety and depression. China accounts for almost half of the world's suicides, although it has about one-quarter of the world's population (Clay, 2002). Many schools now have counselors, and most universities have counseling centers, but most students with problems never seek counseling in person.

However, about 4,000 telephone hotlines and websites offer psychological counseling throughout China ("Modern technology," 2004).

Considering the need, there is a severe lack of school counselors in China. There is also a need for more extensive training of school counselors, most of whom have three years of college but not necessarily a college degree. China does have a national certification program for counselors and psychologists (Liu Yingjia, personal communication, July 12, 2006).

School counselors in China are educated in the most popular counseling models in the Western world, including psychodynamic theory (especially Object Relations), behavior modification, and family therapy. The most popular therapeutic approach is cognitive therapy, particularly Albert Ellis's Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (Clay, 2002). B. F. Skinner and Carl Rogers are also influential (Zhang Xifeng, personal communication, July 12, 2006).

Although school counselors in China today are familiar with the dominant counseling models, they often recommend that clients use Chinese traditional medicine such as *qigong* (deep breathing exercises), acupuncture, and music therapy (Zhiyong, 2006). Because the current Chinese government considers spiritual healing to be superstitious, counselors do not typically recommend it (So, 2005). Very little research is available to document what actually happens in counseling sessions.

School counselors in China said that the single most common problem students have is anxiety related to the pressure to achieve at a high level in school and on university entrance exams (Zhang Xifeng, personal communication, July 10, 2006). Although there is not much reported alcohol or drug addiction, many students are

addicted to video games and computer games. Teenaged boys often complain of loneliness, depression, social uneasiness, and alienation from their parents. Truancy from school is a common problem. Even though school counseling is often freely available, most students do not take advantage of it (Liu Yingjia, Zheng Linke, and Zhang Xifeng, personal communications, July 12, 2006).

China has made tremendous progress in the past 20 years. Students face competition everywhere, and have intense pressure to learn as much as possible, even in the lower grades. Good grades in lower levels are essential for students to be able to enter a good quality middle school. Based on the experience and observations of the authors, many of the students in lower grades are not very motivated to work hard enough to learn difficult subjects like mathematics, but their parents and teachers tend to force them to do it. So many students feel nervous and lonely, and many students give the impression that they are not happy when they are studying.

Because of the One-child Policy in China, most families have only one child, and that tends to put more pressure on the child to succeed (Liu, 2008b). Based on the experience of the authors, although most children are happy, smart, and eager to learn, they are often shy, socially awkward, and have difficulty handling anger. Many children have difficulty cooperating with other children and prefer solitary pursuits such as watching television or playing games on the Internet. It is well known that many boys are addicted to Internet games, especially in grades four to eight, and may spend hours per day playing them. Although many homes do not have a computer, large Internet cafes are common, often having hundreds of computers available for use by the hour for a small fee.

As children grow into adolescence, the generation gap between the children and their parents often becomes a problem. Based on the observations of the authors, many children and teenagers do not like to talk to their parents about their feelings, and many rarely talk to their parents when they are unhappy. They often find it difficult or impossible to say "I am unhappy" or "I am in trouble." Young people who are in a bad mood often write in a diary or do physical exercises, or they may sing songs or talk with friends. Unfortunately, their age-mates cannot usually provide good advice or positive suggestions about how to cope with problems. Their friends may have negative behaviors of their own, such as being truant from school, smoking, or being addicted to playing Internet games.

Many parents are concerned that their child will fall in love at too young an age, so some parents actually restrict their child from interacting with the opposite sex. Nervous parents sometimes even punish their child for such interaction, and children can develop guilt that interferes with their later interpersonal development with the opposite sex (Jiang, 2005). Children from divorced families are likely to feel lonely, disliked, and neglected. Some of the children live with one parent or the other (or a grandparent) and thus miss the affection of the other parent. Many children of divorce appear to have low self-esteem.

Based on the experience and observations of the authors, Chinese parents rarely express concern about the mental health of their children. They emphasize the need to study hard to get into better schools and have a better chance of having a good career. Parents tend to over-emphasize the importance of studying, neglecting the emotional

needs of the children. For example, when the children are sad, parents have been heard to tell them "you must be brave, because life is sad."

Many of the schools in cities in China have mental consultation offices where students who are sad or in trouble can talk with teachers or counselors (Jiang, 2005). However, many students are afraid they will be regarded as abnormal or mentally ill if they talk about their problems, so they do not seek help, and the problems get bigger and bigger. As a result, some students develop serious psychological disorders (Jiang, 2005). Many of the students who pass the National Entrance Exam for university begin to exhibit symptoms of disorders when they leave their parents and live independently (Hou & Zhang, 2007).

There are several implications and recommendations that can be drawn from this overview of school counseling in China today. The history of school counseling in China provides an interesting example of how difficult it can be for a country to develop a profession. Chinese counselors and psychologists have done their best to integrate ancient Chinese philosophical traditions with the best of Western psychology (Blowers, 1996). Even so, there are many difficulties with importing Western psychology, which emphasizes the individual, to a society that emphasizes family and community. In addition, the rapid economic development of China has produced its own pressures, including the trend toward parents sometimes emphasizing grades over personal adjustment. The Chinese example reinforces the idea that counseling theories and strategies must be culturally sensitive and appropriate.

Much more research is needed to establish which counseling approaches work best with Chinese school children, and how best to reduce the stigma that many

Chinese parents and children feel about reaching out for assistance. In this respect, Chinese counselors face some of the same challenges that American counselors face. American school counselors who have first-generation Chinese students as clients in the U. S. can use the information in this paper to better understand the challenges such clients may face. For example, an awareness of the One-child Policy would help counselors understand the experience of Chinese students who are only children.

Becoming familiar with how school counseling is practiced in China can make American school counselors more culturally knowledgeable and sensitive. Some American counselors may become interested in promoting the development of school counseling in China by traveling there and offering training and assistance. Such help would be greatly appreciated, since Chinese counselors are highly motivated to improve their services for Chinese school children, and they welcome the assistance of Americans. From this overview, it can be seen that in spite of great cultural differences, the Chinese people are like Americans in many ways, and we have much to learn from each other. While the challenges are great, the future looks bright.

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