

Original Paper

Research on the Psychological Growth Path of College Students from the Perspective of Discontinuity and Balance Theory

Yingnan Nie¹, Zifei Meng², Jiayi Wang³ & Manhong Liu^{4*}

¹ College of Economics and Management, Northeast Forestry University, Harbin, China

² Business School, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia

³ Business School, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

⁴ College of Wildlife and Protected Area, Northeast Forestry University, Harbin, China

* Correspondence: Manhong Liu, College of Wildlife and Protected Area, Northeast Forestry University, Harbin, China. Email: manhong@nefu.edu.cn

Received: March 2, 2024

Accepted: March 25, 2024

Online Published: April 9, 2024

doi:10.22158/elsr.v5n2p9

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/elsr.v5n2p9>

Funding Information

This paper is a research outcome of the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, Special Project for Ideological and Political Work, Class B, with project number (2572021BX03).

Abstract

Mental health education is an integral component of ideological and political education, serving as a cornerstone in promoting campus harmony and stability. From the discontinuity and balance theory perspective, the agenda setting is closely intertwined with pertinent psychological policies, implementation strategies, and pathways for psychological growth. By attending to the psychological growth issues and information of college students sequentially, ideological and political workers collaborate with psychology experts, we-media platforms, as well as relevant psychological organizations and associations to collectively influence policy-making processes while promoting policy development changes and enhancing the effectiveness of policy implementation. Empirical research findings systematically demonstrate that the mental growth status of college students exhibits positive correlations with variables such as their emotional difficulties, carriers for disseminating psychological work propaganda, peer counselors' working modes, ripple effects from network hot events, and learning outcomes from online courses. This paper explores practical endeavours and innovative attempts towards constructing an atmosphere conducive to mental health education, promoting equilibrium within psychological educational policies, and enhancing educational outcomes for college students.

Keywords

Discontinuity-balance, college students, psychological growth

1. Introduction

Since the early 20th century, developed countries in the West have embarked on systematic investigations into the essential nature and achievement correlation of mental health education for students in higher educational institutions, leading to the formation of a comprehensive academic discipline. As China has progressed through its socialist modernization, there has been a gradual but firm shift towards valuing the psychological health management of university students. Scholars have increasingly focused on the study of mental health education for university students, prompting a detailed examination and synthesis of such research.

This research synthesis was conducted using the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) platform, with searches performed on the Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI). By searching titles, topics, and other relevant fields, keywords such as mental health education for university students, psychological cultivation, and mental health were combined to conduct a comprehensive search. The search covered the period from 2013 to December 31, 2023, resulting in a collection of 498 relevant articles. Subsequent to the selection process and the removal of duplicates, bibliographic data was exported using CNKI's functionality, and further analyzed using the Citespace software for bibliometric analysis. This process culminated in the creation of visual analyses of keyword clustering and keyword timeline mappings, revealing shifts in the research themes of mental health education in Chinese universities over the past decade.

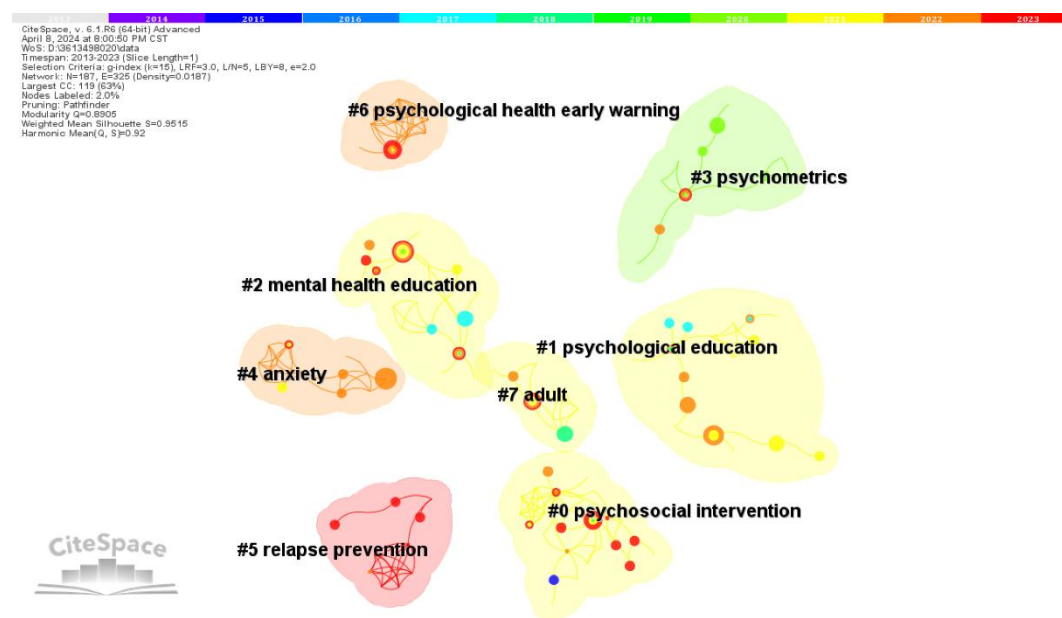


Figure 1. Keyword Clustering

From the keyword timeline mapping, it is evident that mental health education in universities transitioned from an initial combination of medical and educational approaches to explorations of experiential learning by experts, gradually moving towards a holistic mental health education framework characterized by innovation and the comprehensive cultivation of individuals.

The empirical analysis of the current state of student growth within universities from the perspective of Discontinuity-Equilibrium Policy Theory, which looks at the progress and existing challenges within the psychological education process from multiple dimensions and in a comprehensive manner, underscores the need for ideologically and politically engaged workers and policy theorists to collaboratively assess feasible policy pathways for fostering psychological growth among university students. This represents a critical issue requiring joint deliberation.

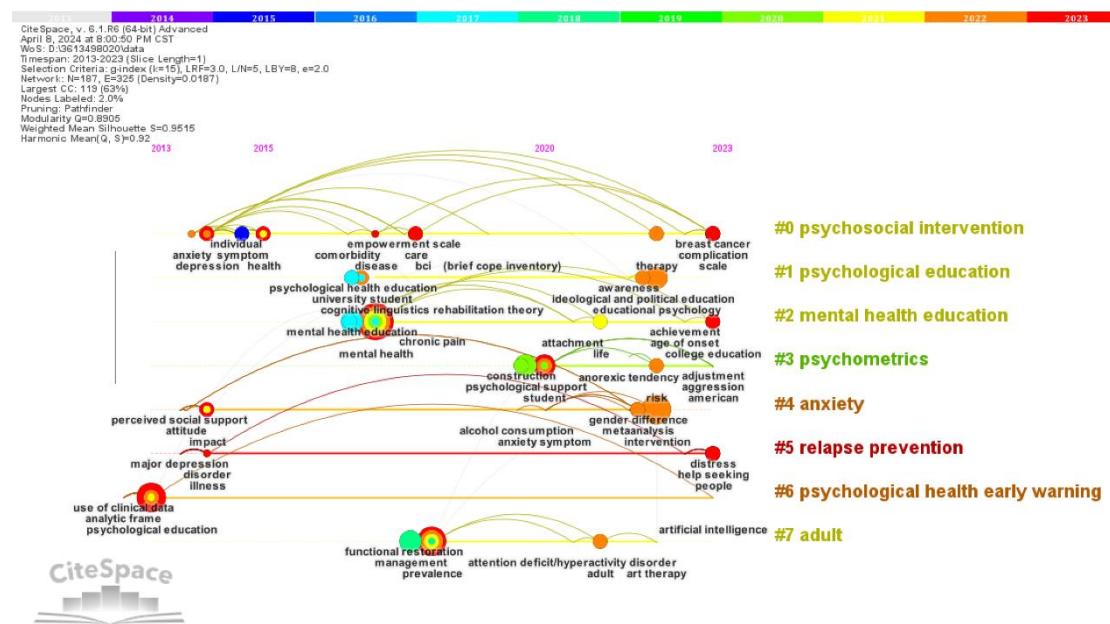


Figure 2. Timeline of Keywords

2. Integration of Discontinuity-Equilibrium Theory in Student Psychological Development

2.1 Foundations of Discontinuity-Equilibrium Theory in Evolutionary and Policy Contexts

The Discontinuity-Equilibrium Theory, proposed by biologists Eldredge and Gould in 1972 to study paleobiological evolution, was later adapted in 1993 by American scholars Baumgartner and Jones for policy change research. The evolution of mental health among university students in China progresses alongside the advancement of higher education, with the development and implementation of mental health education policies reflecting a blend of empirical judgments and emotional preferences, a product of changing times. During the initial phase of economic reform and opening-up, economic development was prioritized, leaving the construction and policy support for mental health relatively unexplored.

However, by the early 21st century, as economic development reached a certain level, a blueprint for mental health education work among university students began to emerge. The issuance of successive regulatory documents on mental health education marked key drivers of policy change, enhancing positive feedback mechanisms and aligning new policy landscapes more closely with practical work realities.

2.1.1 Application of Discontinuity-Equilibrium Theory in Shaping Mental Health Education Policies

The Discontinuity-Equilibrium Theory posits that agenda setting involves the process of prioritizing certain issues and information. The policy landscape and its effects differ across various policy-making contexts, which can be classified into subsystem politics and macro-politics, representing a state of equilibrium induced by institutionalized structures. Leveraging the Discontinuity-Equilibrium Theory, the Ministry of Education issued “Opinions on Strengthening Ideological and Political Education of Students in Higher Education Institutions” in 1980, prompting universities to explore diverse and multifaceted approaches to ideological and political education. However, policy guidance on the psychological health dimension was not yet developed. Entering the 21st century, the massification and popularization of higher education in China significantly altered public thought, leading to the Ministry of Education’s 2001 issuance of “Opinions on Strengthening Mental Health Education Work for University Students,” the first specialized document to promote mental health education within universities, incorporating it into the domain of moral education and establishing the concept of developmental mental health education. Subsequent joint issuances by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and the Communist Youth League in 2005 emphasized the importance of strengthening the mental health education workforce within universities. The national effort to implement these guidelines led to the appointment of dedicated psychological teachers, with Central South University of Forestry and Technology appointing Yuan Hong in 2005 as its sole dedicated psychological teacher at that time. The “Basic Standards for Mental Health Education Work for Students in Regular Higher Education Institutions” issued in 2011 called for a minimum of two dedicated psychological teachers per university, marking a fundamental shift in the policy landscape for university mental health work personnel. The 2018 notification by the Communist Party of China’s Education Ministry Group on “Guidelines for Mental Health Education of Students in Higher Education Institutions” specified a staffing ratio of no less than 1:4000 for dedicated teachers, outlining a more detailed framework for mental health education that includes education and teaching, practical activities, counseling services, and preventive interventions. Universities intensified their policy implementation efforts, initiating personalized institutional explorations aligned with the developmental characteristics of university students, such as Northeast Forestry University’s active exploration of a distinctive peer counselor system to promote the development of mental health education. The 2021 “Notice on Strengthening the Management of Student Mental Health” further emphasized the theoretical knowledge learning aspect, specifying that the curriculum for compulsory public mental health courses should achieve 32-36 hours of instruction. The “Comprehensive Strengthening and Improvement of New Era Student Mental Health

Work Special Action Plan (2023–2025)” issued in 2023 marked a transition from a professionalized to an innovative approach to policy development, focusing on optimizing social psychological services and introducing innovative educational content in aesthetics education.

2.1.2 Influence of Discontinuity-Equilibrium Theory on Policy Formation for Student Psychological Development

Based on the Discontinuity-Equilibrium Theory, a stable policy paradigm and landscape rely on a unified theory of values, a stable institutional structure, and a consistent policy outlook. The introduction of psychological policies in universities is determined by the developmental laws of university students’ growth and the current state of the industry, featuring both positive and negative feedback effects.

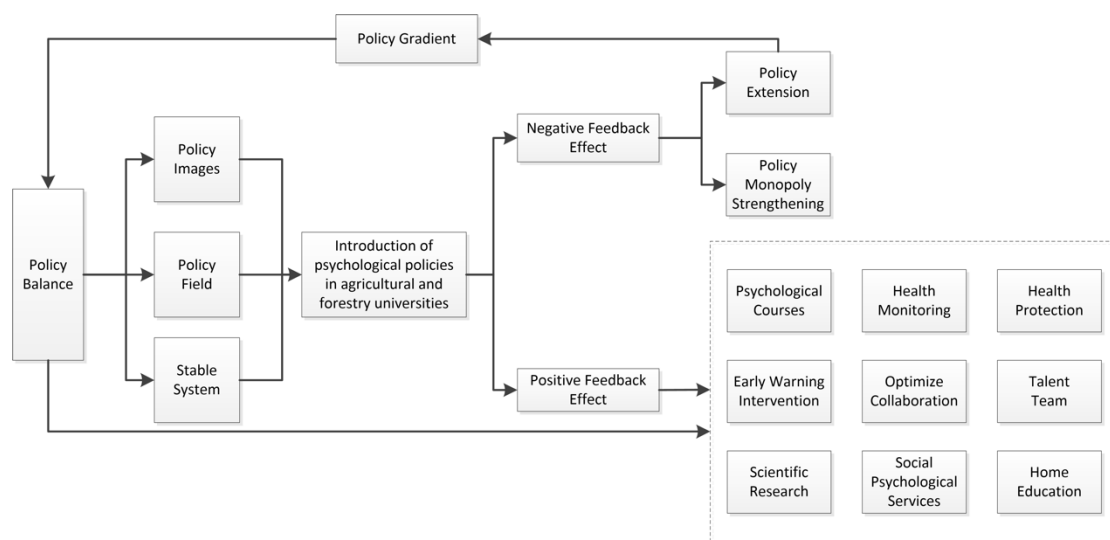


Figure 3. Framework for Psychological Growth of University Students under the Discontinuity-Equilibrium Theory

The policy landscape, the foundation of policy existence, is a hybrid of empirical information and emotional demands, indicating that it encompasses both empirical descriptions of objective facts and elements of emotional evaluation. The evolution of mental health-related policies for university students is progressive, with initial requirements for dedicated psychological work personnel in universities eventually increasing to two and then to a ratio of 1:4000, based on the collective strength of universities nationwide.

3. Comprehensive Analysis of University Students’ Psychological Growth

3.1 Overview and Methodology of the Psychological Growth Survey

With the implementation of relevant policies, universities have gained a deeper understanding of mental health education, witnessing substantial transformations in this area. Research conducted across three institutions examined the current status of students’ psychological growth, the operation of mental health

education via social media, and the deployment of peer counselors for crisis intervention, revealing the following aspects.

3.1.1 Strategies Employed by Students When Facing Psychological Difficulties

When confronted with psychological stress, 67% of students chose to actively confront and resolve the pressure, while 33% opted to avoid stress, engage in self-denial, or indulge in behaviors leading to further demoralization. The presence of periodic exams requiring simultaneous preparation across different subjects within a short timeframe increases study pressure and demands high concentration, significantly altering students' study habits and exacerbating stress levels. According to survey results, 15% chose professional psychological counseling to alleviate stress, 50% relied on self-regulation methods such as sleeping, listening to music, or using smartphones, 30% turned to friends and family for support, and 5% used other methods.

3.1.2 Operation of University Mental Health Platforms on Social Media

14% of students perceived their university's mental health platform on social media as very popular, 51% as popular, 15% as moderately popular, 10% as unpopular, and another 10% as very unpopular. The survey indicated significant room for improvement in some universities' psychological service units and their social media platforms: for instance, the originality of mental health education content was questionable, with some platforms resorting to non-educational reposting, leading to decreased engagement and concerning click-through rates.

3.1.3 Crisis Intervention Methods by Peer Counselors

24% of the surveyed students deemed it very important for peer counselors to actively intervene in crises, 37% found it important, 18% considered it moderately important, and 21% thought it unimportant or very unimportant for peer counselors to engage in active crisis intervention. During the dissemination of mental health education, some students doubted the necessity or effectiveness of crisis intervention, associating it with being "mentally unhealthy" and thus opting to suppress their emotions rather than participate in psychological crisis interventions. These misconceptions pose barriers to the promotion and development of mental health education.

4. Practical Approaches and Dissemination Paths for the Psychological Growth of University Students

4.1 *Focusing on the Growth of University Students, Extending the Dimension of Mental Health Education Through the Entire Chain*

As policies related to mental health education for university students are developed and implemented, there are varying degrees of change in the ways these students experience psychological growth.

Given the interconnected nature of growth experiences, the work chain of psychological cultivation can be extended from a holistic perspective. This extension across the entire chain allows for a precise understanding of the laws of cultivation, reaching deep into the hearts of students, maintaining a focus on the dynamic growth of their mental health, teaching according to their individual needs, innovating

educational methods, and emphasizing differentiated and targeted approaches. This contributes to creating a favorable mental health education atmosphere, considered from the top-level policy design, prioritizing the core essence of ideological and political work, valuing the development of mental health education work, and laying a solid foundation through staffing, infrastructure, financial support, and learning from advanced experiences across multiple dimensions.

4.2 Integrating Psychological Development in Holistic Educational Practices

A side perspective reveals that the worldviews, societal views, and values of university students are formed during their academic journey, marking an inevitable process of psychological maturation and social adaptation. Universities are thus required to adhere to the principle of comprehensive education throughout the psychological practical education process. This orderly and scientific development process, integrated within the broader school environment, necessitates that university psychological practice courses cover the entire educational journey, offering programs suitable for different stages of a student's life, enhancing students' recognition of psychological practical education, and increasing their appreciation for psychological courses.

4.3 Advancing University Mental Health Policies: Evolutionary Strategies and Comprehensive Implementation

With the gradual improvement of the economic level and the allocation of educational resources, universities are placing greater emphasis on the work content of the student psychological cultivation module. The addition of more professional personnel, an increase in resources, gradual perfection of the course system, and the multidimensional integration of psychological cultivation have better implemented policies. Based on maximizing students' agency, extensive coverage, multi-faceted collaboration, and combining internal and external forces, universities persist in integrating moral and psychological education, enhancing humanistic care and psychological guidance for students. This ensures the practical implementation of policy guidance on mental health education, aligns with the realities of each school, carries forward and develops the tradition of good brand activities, optimizes branding, and establishes a systematic policy-making mechanism. Such innovative educational ideas not only promote the comprehensive healthy development of students but also contribute to maintaining campus safety and stability, which is crucial for the country's future development.

Acknowledgement

This paper is a research outcome of the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, Special Project for Ideological and Political Work, Class B, with project number (2572021BX03).

References

- Baumgartner, F. R., & Jones, B. D. (2011). *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (C. Tangzhe, Trans.). Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Ministry of Education. (2001). Opinions on Strengthening Mental Health Education Work for University Students. *Educational and Social Politics*, 2001(1).
- Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Central Committee of the Communist Youth League. (2005). Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving Mental Health Education for University Students. *Educational and Social Politics*, 2005(1).
- Office of the Ministry of Education. (2011). Notification on the Issuance of the Basic Requirements for Mental Health Education Courses in Regular Higher Education Institutions. *Educational and Ideological Politics Office*, 2011(5).
- Communist Party of China's Education Ministry Group. (2018). Guidelines for Mental Health Education of Students in Higher Education Institutions. *Educational Party*, 2018(41).
- Office of the Ministry of Education. (2021). Notice on Strengthening the Management of Student Mental Health Work. *Educational and Ideological Politics Office Letter*, 2021(10).
- Ministry of Education and 17 Other Departments. (2023). Comprehensive Strengthening and Improvement of New Era Student Mental Health Work Special Action Plan (2023–2025). *Educational, Physical, and Arts*, 2023(1).
- Meng, Y. (2018). An Attempt to Discuss Discontinuity and Equilibrium in Policy Change. *The New West*, 2, 56-57.
- Fang, H. Z., & Pan, S. Y. (2019). The Development and Trends of College Student Mental Health Education in China Over the Past 40 Years of Reform and Opening Up. *Contemporary Educational Science*, 8, 91-96.
- Tang, S. L., Yu, X. Q., Zhao, F. F., & Zhou, F. J. (2022). The Internal Landscape and Optimization Strategies of Contemporary Preschool Education Policy Tools in China. *Contemporary Educational Forum*, 3, 37.