

Healing in a Cultural Context: An Exploration of the Intervention of Localized Painting Practices (Such as Traditional Ink Wash Painting and Paper-Cutting Painting) on Psychological Issues of Contemporary College Students

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ABSTRACT

With the intensification of social competition, the incidence of psychological problems among contemporary college students has been on the rise year by year. Traditional psychological intervention methods have limitations in cultural adaptability. This paper takes traditional ink wash painting and paper-cutting painting as the research objects, combines the theories of painting art therapy and cultural psychology, and explores the intervention mechanism of localized painting practices on college students' psychological problems through methods such as literature analysis and case study. Taking the School of Art of Heilongjiang University as a practical sample, the study finds that the freehand brushwork of traditional ink wash painting can help vent emotions, and the folk custom attribute of paper-cutting can enhance cultural identity. Both can effectively alleviate college students' problems such as academic anxiety and interpersonal troubles, providing a new path for mental health education in colleges and universities.

KEYWORDS

Localized painting; College students' psychology; Painting therapy; Traditional culture; Psychological intervention

1 Introduction

1.1 Research background

According to the "2024 Report on the Development of Mental Health of Chinese College Students", nearly 30% of college students in China have psychological problems such as anxiety and depression to varying degrees. Academic pressure, interpersonal conflicts, and self-identity confusion are the main causes. Currently, psychological intervention in colleges and universities mostly relies on Western psychological counseling techniques. Although these techniques have certain effects, due to differences in cultural contexts, some students have "emotional estrangement"—for example, they have difficulties in understanding the abstract concepts in "cognitive behavioral therapy" and lack a sense of cultural belonging to the form of "expressive art therapy".

As localized Chinese art forms, traditional ink wash painting and paper-cutting painting not only carry the cultural thoughts of Taoism's "harmony between man and nature" and Confucianism's "moderation and harmony", but also possess the visual expression characteristic of "expressing meaning through form". The School of Art of Heilongjiang University, which has a solid foundation in traditional art teaching and research, has long been committed to integrating traditional painting resources into quality education. In recent years, it has tried to cross-connect with the university's mental health center, but similar to the industry status quo, it still lacks systematic mechanism analysis and standardized practice models. Therefore, taking this college as a case to explore the psychological healing value of localized painting practices is of great practical significance.

1.2 Research significance and methods

The theoretical significance of this study lies in making up for the deficiency of "lack of localization" in the existing research on art therapy and constructing a three-dimensional intervention framework of "culture-psychology-art". The practical significance is to provide an operable psychological intervention plan for colleges and universities represented by the School of Art of Heilongjiang University, helping college students achieve psychological recovery in the process of cultural identity.

This study adopts two core methods: one is the literature research method, which sorts out the relevant literature on painting therapy and cultural psychology at home and abroad to clarify the theoretical connection between localized painting and psychological healing; the other is the case study method, which takes 3 practical projects (ink wash painting group and paper-cutting healing workshop) carried out by the School of Art of Heilongjiang University in collaboration with its mental health center as the research objects, and verifies the intervention effect through interviews with participants, work analysis, and pre-and post-tests of the SCL-90 scale.

2 Theoretical basis and core concepts

2.1 Core principles of painting art therapy

Painting art therapy is based on the "psychological projection theory", which holds that painting works are the visual presentation of an individual's subconscious—the thickness of lines, the light and shade of colors, and the density of composition can all reflect the emotional state and inner needs of the creator. Compared with language counseling, it avoids "verbal expression barriers" and is especially suitable for college students who are not good at expressing themselves.

The brain lateralization theory further explains the healing mechanism of painting: the left brain is responsible for logical thinking, and the right brain dominates emotional experience. The process of painting can activate the right brain, balance the neural tension of the left brain caused by over-thinking (such as academic anxiety), and achieve the "neural balance of emotional regulation".

2.2 Cultural and psychological attributes of localized painting

From the perspective of cultural psychology, localized painting has "dual healing attributes": on the one hand, its artistic form itself meets the technical requirements of painting therapy; on the other hand, the cultural symbols contained in it can arouse "cultural empathy". For example, the "leaving blank" technique in ink wash painting implies Taoism's way of regulating mentality of "keeping quiet and adhering to simplicity". When students copy landscapes, they will unconsciously imitate the creative state of "slow rhythm and emphasis on artistic conception", thereby alleviating anxiety. Symbols such as "double happiness" and "auspicious clouds" in paper-cutting carry the "auspicious meanings" in folk culture, which can arouse students' positive associations with family and community and enhance their sense of belonging.

This "cultural adaptability" is irreplaceable by Western art therapy—when students come into contact with familiar cultural elements in the process of creation, they will reduce their resistance to "therapy" and form "active participatory healing". This is particularly prominent in the practice of the School of Art of Heilongjiang University, where students majoring in fine arts and non-art majors both show high acceptance of traditional painting intervention.

3 Core manifestations of contemporary college students' psychological problems and dilemmas in cultural adaptation

3.1 Main types of college students' psychological problems

Combined with the survey data of the mental health center of Heilongjiang University and case observations, the psychological problems of contemporary college students are mainly manifested in three categories: first, academic anxiety. Due to the fierce competition in postgraduate entrance examinations and employment, 68% of the respondents from the university said they "often suffer from insomnia due to academic pressure"; second, interpersonal troubles. Most of the students are only-children, and 45% of them have "social avoidance" and find it difficult to establish in-depth interpersonal relationships; third, self-identity confusion. Under the impact of multiculturalism, some students, especially non-local students in Heilongjiang, are confused about "self-worth" and "cultural identity", and have symptoms of "empty heart disease".

3.2 Problems of cultural adaptation in traditional psychological intervention

The limitations of existing intervention methods in Heilongjiang University are mainly reflected in two aspects: first, language-based counseling relies on "rational expression", but influenced by the regional cultural habit of "reserve and introversion" in Northeast China, some students are unwilling to face negative emotions directly, leading to "superficialization" of counseling; second, Western art therapy mostly adopts forms such as abstract painting and color doodling, lacking the support of cultural symbols, so students are prone to a sense of "unfamiliarity"—for example, the university's mental health center once tried to use the "abstract color catharsis method" to intervene in anxious students, and some participants reported that "they didn't know what to paint and felt very abrupt".

In contrast, localized painting can reduce students' psychological defense due to its "cultural familiarity". For example, in the paper-cutting creation activities of the School of Art of Heilongjiang University, students start from familiar activities such as "cutting window decorations" and "making fortune characters", so it is easier for them to enter a relaxed state and then open their hearts.

4 Intervention mechanism and case analysis of localized painting practices (taking school of art of heilongjiang university as an example)

4.1 Traditional ink wash painting: emotional regulation and self-exploration

The intervention mechanism of ink wash painting is mainly reflected in "freehand brushwork" and "process nature": on the one hand, the "thickness, dryness and wetness" of ink can freely express emotions—anxious students may use rapid lines and thick ink colors, but under the guidance of teachers, by adjusting the speed of brush movement and trying "leaving blank", they can gradually calm their emotions; on the other hand, the "concentration" in the creation process can block the cycle of negative thinking and achieve the effect of "mindfulness". The School of Art of Heilongjiang University has a professional ink wash painting teaching team and a special studio, which provides sufficient conditions for the implementation of this intervention model.

Case 1: In the spring semester of 2024, the School of Art of Heilongjiang University, in collaboration with the university's mental health center, carried out an 8-week ink wash group activity for 15 students with "academic anxiety" (selected from different majors such as art design, mechanical engineering, and Chinese language and literature). The activity was led by two teachers from the traditional painting department of the college. In the first stage, students were allowed to freely create "the appearance of anxiety", and most of the works were "disorderly lines" and "dark color blocks"; in the second stage, students were guided to copy the classic ink wash work "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains" collected by the college's art museum, focusing on feeling the "slow brushstrokes" and "broad composition"; in the third stage, students were encouraged to create "the ideal learning state". After 8 weeks, the average score of the SCL-90 anxiety scale of the participants decreased by 1.2 points. A senior student majoring in mechanical engineering mentioned in the interview: "When painting landscapes, my attention was focused on the tip of the brush and the ink color. I temporarily forgot the pressure of the postgraduate entrance examination and felt very calm. The teacher of the art college explained the 'leaving blank' technique with the philosophy of 'letting go', which made me suddenly realize."



Figure 1

4.2 Paper-cutting painting: cultural identity and interpersonal restoration

The intervention value of paper-cutting is concentrated on "folk custom attribute" and "interactivity": first, the folk custom symbols in paper-cutting works can arouse cultural memories; second, paper-cutting is often carried out in the form of "cooperative creation", which can promote interpersonal interaction and improve social avoidance. The School of Art of Heilongjiang University has long been engaged in the inheritance and research of Northeast folk paper-cutting, and has sorted out a set of teaching materials suitable for non-art majors, which provides a solid foundation for the intervention practice.

Case 2: In the autumn semester of 2023, the School of Art of Heilongjiang University organized a 6-week paper-cutting workshop for 20 students with "interpersonal troubles" (screened by the mental health center). The activity was hosted by a teacher specializing in folk art in the college, and integrated Northeast characteristic paper-cutting symbols such as "snow scenes", "corn cobs" and "sleighs". It was divided into three links: first, students cut "their own personalities" individually. Introverted students mostly cut "small-sized, symmetrical patterns", while extroverted students chose "large-sized, complex shapes"; second, students worked in pairs to cut "the ideal interpersonal relationship", and teachers guided both parties to communicate their design ideas; third, all students jointly completed a "campus scenery paper-cutting wall" with Northeast cultural characteristics, including elements such as the iconic buildings of Heilongjiang University and local folk customs. After the activity, 80% of the students said that "they communicated more with their classmates", and the average score of the SCL-90 interpersonal sensitivity scale decreased by 0.9 points. A freshman from Hunan

Province feedback: "When cutting the 'snow scene paper-cut' with classmates, we talked about the differences between the south and the north's winter. There is no need to deliberately find topics. It is very natural to focus on the works, and I feel that the distance between us has narrowed. The 'corn cob' pattern taught by the teacher reminds me of my grandmother's home, which is very warm."



Figure 2

5 Conclusions and prospects

5.1 Research conclusions

Through theoretical analysis and case verification based on the School of Art of Heilongjiang University, this study draws the following conclusions: First, traditional ink wash painting and paper-cutting painting can effectively intervene in college students' psychological problems, especially in alleviating anxiety, improving interpersonal relationships, and enhancing self-identity; second, their core advantage lies in "cultural adaptability" —reducing psychological defense through familiar artistic forms and achieving psychological recovery in the process of cultural identity, which is fully verified in the practice of Heilongjiang University; third, the intervention mechanism can be summarized as a "three-fold path": emotional catharsis (artistic expression), self-exploration (projection analysis), and cultural connection (sense of belonging construction).

5.2 Practical suggestions and future directions

For colleges and universities represented by Heilongjiang University, localized painting intervention can be promoted from three aspects: first, integrate it into mental health courses—taking the School of Art as the main body, set up optional modules such as "ink wash healing" and "Northeast folk paper-cutting psychological workshop" for the whole school; second, strengthen teacher training—organize joint training between psychological counselors and traditional painting teachers of the art college, so that counselors can master basic techniques and intervention skills; third, build a characteristic database—based on the existing practice of the School of Art, establish a "work-psychology" analysis database containing Northeast cultural symbols to provide support for personalized intervention.

Future research can be further expanded: on the one hand, take Heilongjiang University as a benchmark, expand the sample size to carry out cross-college comparative studies in Heilongjiang Province to verify the universality of the intervention effect; on the other hand, in cooperation with the psychology department of Heilongjiang University, combine neuroscience technologies (such as EEG monitoring) to quantitatively analyze the impact of localized painting on the brain's emotional center, providing a more scientific basis for the intervention mechanism.

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