

The Application of Nonviolent Communication in University Mental Health Education: Theoretical Integration and Practical Pathways

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ABSTRACT

With the acceleration of social transformation and intensified academic competition, mental health education in universities faces challenges in communication efficacy and emotional support. Nonviolent Communication (NVC), grounded in its four core components—observation, feeling, need, and request—provides an effective framework for enhancing interpersonal understanding, emotional regulation, and relational harmony. Through literature review and case analysis, this study explores the application value of NVC in university mental health education, demonstrating its role in addressing the shortcomings of traditional methods, improving communication quality, and strengthening students' self-help psychological competencies. A multidimensional application model is constructed, encompassing curriculum integration, counseling intervention, campus culture, and digital tools, while also analyzing challenges such as cultural adaptation and resource constraints along with corresponding strategies. The systematic integration of Nonviolent Communication is conducive to fostering a campus culture characterized by empathy and emotional intelligence, thereby supporting the holistic and harmonious development of students.

KEYWORDS

Nonviolent communication; University mental health education; Communication model; Psychological intervention

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Proposal

At present, higher education in China has entered a phase of massification, with an ever-expanding university student population. Their mental health not only affects individual development but also has implications for family well-being and social stability. Factors such as academic pressure, interpersonal conflicts, career uncertainty, and emotional distress intertwine, leading to increasingly prevalent and younger-onset mental health issues such as anxiety and depression on campuses. While traditional mental health education models, such as lectures, mandatory courses, and individual counseling, have played a role, they still fall short in fostering deep interaction, emotional connection, and the cultivation of everyday communication skills. Incidents of psychological crises arising from miscommunication between teachers and students or among peers occur from time to time.

Against this backdrop, the Nonviolent Communication model, developed by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, has garnered significant attention. It is not merely a communication technique but a philosophy and way of life centered on needs-awareness, aimed at promoting understanding and cooperation. This study seeks to explore whether the theoretical core of Nonviolent Communication aligns intrinsically with the goals of university mental health education. It further aims to design a systematic and actionable pathway for integrating Nonviolent Communication into the existing mental health education framework, while analyzing potential challenges in implementation and corresponding strategies, with the ultimate goal of enhancing students' psychological resilience and improving the support system for mental health in higher education.

1.2 Research Significance

1.2.1 Theoretical Significance

This study examines and integrates the interdisciplinary theory of Nonviolent Communication within the specific context of China's university mental health education. It contributes to expanding and deepening the theoretical boundaries of psychological education in higher education. By analyzing the connections between NVC and humanistic psychology, as well as emotion-focused educational theories, it provides theoretical support for constructing a mental health education paradigm that emphasizes intersubjectivity, emotional experience, and relational development.

1.2.2 Practical Significance

The research aims to provide university mental health educators with a set of concrete and practical tools and methods. By enhancing the communication competencies of educators, it seeks to improve the quality of all interactive relationships on campus, empower students to master core skills in emotional management and conflict resolution, and

ultimately promote a shift in mental health work from "crisis intervention" to "developmental prevention," and from "individual counseling" to "ecological cultivation."

1.3 Literature Review at Domestic and International Levels

Since its establishment by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s, Nonviolent Communication has evolved from a conflict mediation technique into a globally influential communication philosophy and practical system. Its application and research within the field of university mental health education exhibit distinct developmental trajectories and varying depths of investigation in domestic and international contexts.

1.3.1 International Research: Parallel Advancements in Theoretical Depth and Practical Expansion

International research and application of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) have reached a mature stage, characterized by deep integration between theoretical exploration and practical implementation.

At the theoretical level, studies have moved beyond introductory explanations to investigate its psychological mechanisms. Extensive research has linked NVC with humanistic psychology (Rogers, 1961), affective neuroscience (Damasio, 1994), and social cognitive theories. Additionally, the integration of NVC with mindfulness has emerged as a prominent research focus. Both are considered to share a core emphasis on nonjudgmental awareness of present experiences, and their synergistic application has been shown to enhance emotional regulation more effectively (Hülshager et al., 2013).

In higher education practice, NVC has been systematically integrated into multiple dimensions. For example, Stanford University offers a course titled "Empathy and Communication," with core modules based on NVC. Research indicates that students participating in such courses demonstrate significant improvements in conflict management strategies, emotion recognition accuracy, and interpersonal satisfaction (Suárez et al., 2022). In professional education—such as medicine, nursing, social work, law, and teacher training—NVC is taught as a core communication skill to cultivate "humanistic care" and the ability to navigate "difficult conversations" among future professionals. NVC also serves as a key tool in fostering "peaceable campuses" and implementing "restorative practices."

In terms of research methodologies, international studies have evolved from early case reports to rigorous empirical approaches, including randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and longitudinal studies, providing robust evidence for the educational efficacy of NVC.

1.3.2 Domestic Research: Emerging Applications and Localization Explorations

Domestic attention to and research on Nonviolent Communication began in the early 21st century, initially centered on book translations and commercial training. In recent years, as society has placed greater emphasis on mental health and harmonious relationships, its application in the educational field—particularly at the basic education level—has seen an increase in related studies. However, research in higher education remains in the preliminary and exploratory stages.

Current domestic research exhibits the following characteristics:

At the university level, existing research has mainly concentrated on two directions: first, the use of NVC as an auxiliary technique in psychological counseling to help clients clarify emotions and needs in individual sessions; second, its application in improving specific interpersonal relationships, such as dormitory or romantic relationships. These studies confirm the effectiveness of NVC in addressing specific communication issues.

Currently, there is a scarcity of studies in China that systematically examine NVC within the framework of "all-member, whole-process, and all-round" psychological education in higher education. Most research remains confined to summaries of individual counselors' or psychological consultants' experiences or descriptions of the outcomes of specific elective courses. There is a notable absence of comprehensive application models—spanning theoretical integration, curriculum design, teacher training, and campus culture cultivation—supported by empirical validation.

2 Core Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Analysis of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) Theory

The core of Nonviolent Communication lies in guiding individuals to express themselves honestly and listen to others with empathy through four closely interconnected elements: observation, feeling, need, and request.

Observation: Distinct from evaluation, this involves objectively describing specific situations or behaviors.

Feeling: This refers to expressing the internal emotional experiences evoked by observations.

Need: This entails identifying and articulating the deeper needs that give rise to feelings. NVC posits that all feelings

stem from whether needs are met or unmet.

Request: This involves making specific, positive, and actionable appeals rather than vague demands or commands.

This process aims to establish a shared human language grounded in "needs," transforming conflicts from battles of "right and wrong" into explorations of "needs," thereby fostering understanding and collaboration.

2.2 The Connotation and Objectives of University Mental Health Education

University mental health education is dedicated to promoting the comprehensive development of students' psychological well-being and enhancing their adaptive capacities through systematic educational approaches. Its core objectives focus on cultivating students' sound psychological qualities, effectively preventing the occurrence of psychological issues, and providing professional support for those in need. This educational framework is guided by a multi-tiered set of goals: at the developmental level, it emphasizes the optimization of psychological qualities and the exploration of potential for all students; at the preventive level, it prioritizes the early identification of and intervention for at-risk groups; and at the interventional level, it offers professional counseling and referral services to students experiencing psychological distress.

In current practice, key methods such as curriculum-based instruction, psychological counseling, group activities, and crisis intervention have been widely implemented. However, effectively translating the cultivation of psychological literacy into students' practical abilities in daily interpersonal interactions remains a critical area requiring strengthening within contemporary educational practice.

2.3 Analysis of the Compatibility Between NVC and Mental Health Education in Universities

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and university mental health education are highly aligned in their core values. Both are grounded in humanistic psychology, emphasizing respect for human dignity, potential, and self-development, and both prioritize the cultivation of empathy—with NVC offering a structured, practical pathway for such training. In terms of objectives, the focus of NVC on emotional management, relationship building, and self-awareness directly corresponds to key modules in mental health education, such as emotional education and interpersonal guidance. Furthermore, both aim to foster supportive interpersonal networks: NVC provides concrete methodological tools to implement the philosophy of "whole-person psychological education," transforming daily interactions among teachers, students, and peers into opportunities for psychological growth and micro-level guidance, thereby playing a synergistic role in building a holistic campus psychological ecosystem.

3 The Necessity and Feasibility of Introducing NVC into College Mental Health Education

3.1 Necessity Analysis

Given the reality that university students' psychological distress is deeply intertwined with interpersonal relationships, Nonviolent Communication (NVC) offers targeted tools to resolve conflicts and enhance mutual understanding, thereby effectively complementing developmental psychological education. In terms of improving practical effectiveness, NVC can assist counselors and peer psychological supporters in overcoming communication barriers, building trust, and engaging in more in-depth psychological support. Furthermore, traditional approaches often emphasize knowledge over practice and have limited reach. As a trainable and transferable life skill, NVC contributes to transforming mental health education into a more daily and life-integrated practice.

3.2 Feasibility Argumentation

The NVC framework is clear and its steps are well-defined, making it easy to master through formats such as workshops. Its core principle of "focusing on needs" also resonates with traditional Chinese wisdom such as "empathetically understanding others," providing a foundation for cultural acceptance. The existing mental health education system in universities—including courses, counseling centers, and student organizations—offers institutional and structural support for integrating NVC as an "efficiency-enhancing module." Preliminary practices in some domestic universities, such as NVC elective courses or workshops, have shown positive student participation and feedback, demonstrating its initial practical feasibility.

4 Application Path Design of Nonviolent Communication in College Mental Health Education

4.1 Integration into Curriculum and Teaching Systems

Systematic theoretical instruction and practical training are delivered through university-wide elective courses such as Nonviolent Communication and Interpersonal Relationships. Additionally, dedicated modules focusing on emotional expression and conflict resolution are incorporated into compulsory courses like University Student Mental Health. Themed workshops are also conducted for specific groups, including freshmen, student leaders, and dormitory monitors, to enhance their contextual application skills.

4.2 Application in Psychological Counseling and Group Guidance

In individual counseling, NVC techniques are employed to help clients clarify their emotions and needs while fostering healthier expression. Structured closed group sessions centered on NVC are designed to address themes such as emotional recognition, needs exploration, and communication challenges within family or intimate relationships.

4.3 Cultivation of a Supportive Campus Cultural Ecosystem

NVC training is integrated into professional development programs for counselors, mental health educators, and student leaders, building a core team for campus-wide promotion. Initiatives such as "Empathy Week," themed class meeting competitions, and related activities foster a campus atmosphere that values communication and mutual respect. Furthermore, the adoption of NVC-based agreements and daily communication practices is encouraged in dormitories and classrooms.

4.4 Development of Online Education and Digital Resources

A series of micro-lectures and podcasts are produced to disseminate NVC knowledge via new media platforms. Online practice communities are established with interactive tasks to encourage daily skill reinforcement. The exploration of AI-powered conversational tools is also underway to provide students with simulated communication scenarios and immediate feedback, creating an integrated online-offline application ecosystem.

5 Practical Challenges and Response Strategies

5.1 Main Challenges

In terms of cultural adaptation, the emphasis on direct expression in NVC may conflict with the implicit communication norms valued in Chinese culture, potentially leading to misunderstandings regarding the articulation of needs. During implementation, issues such as insufficient participant motivation, a shortage of qualified instructors, and superficial execution of activities may arise, making the establishment of long-term mechanisms a critical challenge. Evaluating effectiveness is also difficult, as improvements in communication patterns and psychological well-being are long-term and implicit processes that are not easily captured by short-term quantitative metrics.

5.2 Response Strategies

Promote localized adaptation by integrating NVC with traditional Chinese wisdom, such as the principle of "do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire," and incorporating real-life campus case studies to enhance cultural relevance. Implement a phased promotion strategy by first cultivating a core group of instructors and volunteers, accumulating experience through small-scale pilot programs, and gradually expanding reach while integrating with existing flagship initiatives to improve sustainability. Develop a multidimensional evaluation system that combines process documentation, pre- and post-intervention assessments, and qualitative interviews to comprehensively capture project outcomes and student experiences.

6 Conclusion and Prospects

6.1 Research Conclusion

This study demonstrates a high degree of alignment in philosophy and objectives between Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and university mental health education, establishing that its systematic integration is both

necessary and feasible. NVC provides a structured and actionable framework of communication tools and relational principles for psychological education, effectively addressing gaps in the cultivation of daily communication skills within the current system. Through a four-dimensional application model integrating curriculum, counseling, culture, and digital resources, NVC can operate across three levels—individual skill development, interpersonal relationship enhancement, and campus ecological construction—thereby systematically supporting the goals of psychological education.

6.2 Innovations and Limitations

This study proposes for the first time a systematic application model for integrating NVC into university mental health education, with particular emphasis on cultural adaptation and ecological implementation strategies, offering a pathway for translating theory into practice. The primary limitation lies in its reliance on literature review and theoretical deduction; the proposed model requires empirical validation through action research, and its generalizability needs further testing and adaptation across diverse types of universities.

6.3 Future Prospects

Future work should prioritize the following directions: advancing longitudinal empirical research on the effects of NVC training on psychological resilience, interpersonal trust, and related indicators; extending its application to specific contexts such as advisor – student conversations, academic mentoring, team management, and other specialized scenarios; promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and advocating for the inclusion of communication competence in mental health education policy frameworks; and developing standardized textbooks, manuals, and assessment tools tailored to the Chinese university context to support the professionalization and wider dissemination of relevant resources.

7 Concluding Remarks

Introducing Nonviolent Communication into higher education extends beyond the acquisition of communication skills—it fosters a fundamental shift in cognition: from habitual judgment to sustained observation, from casual blame to profound understanding, and from instinctive confrontation to proactive collaboration. This transformation pertains not merely to technique, but to a renewal of how the mind engages with the world. Such an approach may well pave a meaningful pathway for university mental health education toward a deeper and more expansive horizon of holistic development.

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