From the Perspective of Positive Psychology: Happiness Education of University Students

Mei-Yan ZHU*
Zhejiang University Ningbo Institute of Technology, Ningbo, China
nbzhmy@126.com
*Corresponding author

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Abstract. Positive Psychology is a new psychological trend emerging in the late 20th century, which advocates positive research orientation and is dedicated to the study of human beings’ intrinsic or potential virtue and strength, aiming at improving people’s sense of well-being and thus creating a happier life for them. From the perspective of positive psychology, this thesis, proceeding from the status quo of mental health of college students and happiness education in schools of higher learning in China, purports to indicate the urgency of carrying out happiness education in colleges and universities. Then the paper proposes to present some strategies and suggestions concerning the happiness education in universities such as conducting happiness course as soon as possible or integrating it with other courses. Meanwhile, in order to establish a happy campus, great efforts also should be made to create a favorable environment for students.

Introduction

Sheldon M. & King L.(2001)believed that: “positive psychology is a psychological trend which endeavors to study mankind’s strength and virtues by utilizing the comparatively consummiate and effective test method and measuring means in psychological field currently.” Positive psychology is a discipline that discusses what genuine happiness is and how to be happier. The positive concepts and contents in positive psychology will be of practical significance to the implementation of happiness education amid college students in China.

The Overview of Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology was first put forward by Martin Seligman (1997), professor of the University of Pennsylvania. His remarks on the flaws of the traditional psychology which only focused on the weakness and problems of human nature were trenchant and perceptive. As opposed to the conventional psychology, he proposed that psychology should turn to pay more attention to virtues and advantages of human beings, thus carving out a new research area in psychology.

Positive psychology takes ordinary people as its research object, focuses on the mankind’s positive strength and potential, and calls for the decipherment of psychological phenomenon in an optimistic manner. By advocating the appreciation of human beings, discovering their favorable advantages as well as rearing the positive quality and virtue, positive psychology attempts to facilitate the formation of positive personality so as to assist people in locating their lifelong purpose and meaning, thus creating a happier and better life. Positive psychology lays great emphasis on the positive orientation, which transcends the traditional psychology that is only concerned with offering solutions to and providing remediation for human problems.

Martin Seligman(2002)believed that positive psychology mainly focused on three fundamentally important research areas, the study on positive emotions, the study on the positive traits of personality, primarily on the virtue and strength, as well as the study on the positive organization system, such as democratic society, united families, freedom of speech and the like. When it comes to positive emotions, Martin Seligman categorized them into three types: future, present and past.
BL Fredrickson propounded the Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions (2001), while Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi put forward the Theory of Flow (2000). In terms of positive traits of personality, they concluded six universally acceptable virtues, namely wisdom and knowledge, courage, benevolence, justice, abstinence, and spiritual excellence, which consist of 24 strengths by dint of the study on cultural classics of many countries. As to positive organization systems, predominantly families, schools, workplace and society are entangled.

Positive psychology has found wide application in those fields like education, enterprise management, and medicine, and yielded fruitful results at the same time. The well-known positive education movement has been carried out in educational domain. In 2002, professor Tal Ben-Shahar started a course named Positive Psychology in Harvard University which was well-received by students. The course was later in 2006 available to all people around the globe as open class via internet, exerting tremendous impact. At present, more than 200 universities and colleges in America have started to offer positive psychology course. In 2006, the top-caliber British private school Wellington College began to conduct the positive psychology course and made huge success, thus provoking the new tendency in educational field all over the Britain.

The Urgency of Carrying out Happiness Education in Chinese Universities

Generally Less Optimistic Situation of Mental Health of College Students

Greenspoon (2001) argued that psychological morbidity and subjective well-being are two important indicators for measuring one’s mental health, which gives account of mental health conditions from both positive and negative aspect. Therefore, empirical investigation on the psychological morbidity and subjective well-being of university students must be conducted in order to get a full insight into the overall condition of their mental health.

Since the 1990s, workers of mental health have begun to widely utilize the SCL-90 to carry out psychological test on students. Most research results showed that 20 percent to 30 percent college students had some psychological problems, manifesting such symptoms as compulsion, anxiety, horror, psychosis and depression. Zhu Ruizuo conducted a psychological survey among 1020 university students in the city of shenyang in 2015, which showed that students tested with SCL-90 gained a higher score than that of national teenagers who were measured by normal model, and 26.38% tested students were diagnosed with mental health problems, indicating signs of compulsion, sensitivity to interpersonal relations and melancholia.

With the emergence of positive psychology, modern researches are more disposed to use indicators such as sense of happiness to measure mental health status. Happiness felt from subjective and spiritual aspect is billed as Subjective Well-being. Diener E. (2000) stated that SWB, which constituted an important composite psychological index measuring the quality of individuals’ personal and social life and was comprised of cognitive component and emotional component, mainly referred to the overall assessment of the quality of life that individuals make in accordance with the standard they previously set for themselves. In recent years, a mounting number of scholars in China are apt to test students’ subjective well-being. Jie Dong, Li-ying Zhang and Jing-jing Zhang (2014) adopted SWBS-CC20 to test 2756 university students and applied meta-analysis method to analyze the results, whose conclusion was that the Subjective Well-being of college students in general was obviously lower than the national normal model.

According to investigations conducted by domestic scholars, the following conclusion can be drawn: the overall mental health state of college students are not very good. Given this situation, higher institutions should make happiness education course accessible to students as soon as possible. Because happiness education can serve to optimize the mental health quality of college students, develop their psychological potential, and elevate their sensation of subjective well-being, hence efficaciously helping them lead a happier life.
The Implementation of Happiness Course in Universities and Colleges in Mainland China

Happiness education is a kind of educational practice exclusively centering on happiness and carried out for the happiness of people in a happy atmosphere. Propelled by the tendency of opening happiness education course outside China, the basic theory of education committee of China educational society held an annual meeting on the theme of “Education and Happiness” in 2007, which marked the beginning of the availability of happiness education course in Chinese mainland universities. Zhejiang University was among the first in China to make happiness education accessible to all of its students as an elective course in April, 2008. Later, Yunnan University followed suit. In November that year, the first Presidents Forum on the Mental Health of Universities Nationwide was successfully called upon in Xiamen, which appealed to schools to start the happiness education course. Ensuing the meeting, some schools of higher learning including Qinghua University responded to start the course. Unfortunately, only a handful of colleges decided to offer the happiness education as an independent course.

It is not only of immense significance, but of great exigency to the realization of Chinese dream for the Chinese universities to implement happiness education, which will boost students’ experience of positive emotions, cultivate their positive psychological quality, and give play to their strengths and virtues in the hope of training them into creative and blissfully happy talents. Happiness education will be conducive to the establishment of scientific outlook on happiness amid students, and instruct them to acquire happiness in the way so that their abilities to the comprehension of happiness, experience of happiness as well as the creation of happiness will be considerably improved, and their feeling of happiness will be augmented at the same time. Hence, in its inception of being popularized, happiness course is widely welcomed by students. However, due to the fact that China is a late starter in carrying out the happiness education course and still in the preliminary phase of exploration, there has been a far cry from being mature and perfect.

The Strategy of Carrying out Happiness Education among College Students in China

Researches showed that individuals’ SWB are influenced by both personal factors including positive psychological traits, sound personality, physical and mental health and others, and by external environment, like social fairness and justice, happy families, active organizations and the like. Consequently, it is imperative for the higher institutions to carry out the happiness education and offer special training pertinent to the course for students in order to nurture their positive psychological quality and perfect their personality traits. Meanwhile, great attention should be paid to the construction of campus environment, purporting to create an enabling atmosphere and a felicitously happy school.

To Set up Special Course on Happiness Education

Happiness is not something that individuals are born with, but must be acquired through education and learning. Considering the current situation of mental health of university students in China, institutions of higher learning ought to include the happiness education in the regular curriculum system as quickly as possible and make the course accessible to the vast majority of students. Schools should particularly impart the knowledge of happiness to students in a purposeful, planned, well-organized and systematic manner with a view of providing the assistance for students in establishing the scientific outlook on happiness. Only in this way can students acquire the wisdom of happy, recognize happiness, discover happiness, experience happiness, enjoy happiness and create happiness, hence leading a happy life ever after.

The crux in opening special course on happiness consists in the arrangement of scientific and appropriate educational contents. It seems to us that happiness is more of a kind of competence and practice than merely a concept and a sensation. The complete happiness education is supposed to be the combination of cognition, experience, capability and practice, with the cognition of happiness as the starting point, the experience of happiness as the key, the capability of happiness as the guarantee and the practice of happiness as the purpose. As a consequence, regarding the content of
happiness education offered in schools of higher learning, the teaching of happiness recognition, happiness experience, happiness competence, as well as happiness practice must be included.

The education on happiness recognition involves the interpretation of some fundamental theories regarding the connotation of happiness, the nature of happiness as well as the method of acquiring happiness to help increase students’ awareness of happiness, shape their understanding of happiness and make them acquainted with the way to happiness. The education on happiness experience mainly seeks to cultivate positive emotions and help shape the positive personality by means of the teaching of aesthetic appreciation, gratitude and love. In addition, individuals can also experience genuine happiness in adversity and misfortune after receiving the education on such subject as setbacks, failure and death. The education on the capacity of happiness predominantly tries to set up certain educational situation or real-life scenarios to nurture students’ competence in discovering, experiencing, savoring, and creating happiness. The education on the practice of happiness purports to let the students make use of the knowledge of happiness they have learned in daily life, and bring their potential into full play, keep life at its best state and thus enjoy a happy life while enriching their personality and creating the value of life.

Furthermore, schools of higher education might as well take into consideration those relevant factors, such as credit, assessment, and outline of the course, teaching method, teaching faculty, and teaching effect when offering special course on happiness education.

The Integration of Happiness Education with Other Disciplines

The special course on happiness teaching will achieve limited results with efforts and resources provided by only a small number of people. Happiness education should take advantage of the broad resources available within the campus, and mobilize all the helping hands that could be gathered so as to reach its full potential. Institutions of higher learning should integrate happiness education with relevant disciplines.

The integration with moral education When it comes to the relation between morality and happiness, the traditional Chinese culture emphasized that the consistency and interdependence between morality and happiness. Zhang Zai, learned scholar of the Northern Song dynasty thought that the morality is the foundation of felicity, while the felicity is the inevitable result of morality. Modern scholar Feng Jianjun (2011) believed that morality is the source of happiness and happiness is the natural result of being moral. What has been mentioned above all indicates that morality is the prerequisite and means for acquiring happiness. In addition, happiness is the result and purpose of the moral perfection. Individuals, in the process of pursuing moral amelioration and self-improvement, will win the admiration of the public, and have a clear conscience at the same time. With their values being proven, they will obtain spiritual pleasure and experience blissfulness.

For the fact that the pursuit of happiness should be combined with moral improvement, so universities and colleges should integrate happiness education with moral education, rendering it an integral part of moral education. Moral education is intended to instill students with the correct outlook on life, view of value and morality. It is concerned with the spiritual needs of students, and dedicated to enriching one’s mind and edifying one’s sentiment, with the improvement of personality and cultivation of virtue as its ultimate goal, and care and happiness as its inherent value, in a way that students can be guided on the right path towards a happy life. In practicing moral education, students are inculcated with the knowledge of outlook on life, and view of value and morality so that they will feel happier and lead a felicitous life.

Students should be instructed to ponder over questions related to life like “what do people live for”, “how should people live”, “what’s the value and meaning of being alive”, which will help them establish the right lifelong goals, have a positive attitudes towards life, seek the value and meaning of life and experience happiness in their life journey. Students should be guided to meditate on issues regarding life values such as “what’s the value of life”, “what’s the standard for assessing the value of life”, and “what is need to realize the value of life”, which would be of assistance for them to choose the proper view of value, create a worthy life and obtain true felicity while making contributions to society. Students also ought to be asked to think about moral issues.
like “what is morality”, “what do moral values lie in”, “how to nurture virtues”, which will aide
students in the establishment of correct moral views, the relentless pursuit of higher moral goals, the
active participation in the activities of moral practice and eventually being happy with sublime
virtue.

The integration with mental health education  Personality traits, social support and mental
health are important factors exerting influence on the SWB, which has been proven by some
relevant researches. Costa and McCrae (1991) asserted that SWB was inextricably intertwined with
personality traits, which meant that people with different personality traits would undoubtedly
manifest disparate positive emotions, negative emotions and degrees of life satisfaction. They
further expatiated on the idea that extroversion and neuroticism have an obvious bearing on the
SWB, that extroversion was closely linked with positive emotions and degrees of life satisfaction
but was irrelevant to negative emotions, and that neuroticism had steady correlations with negative
feelings. By surveying the relationships among college students’ mental health, SWB and social
support they had received, Liu Jing (2007) found that both social support and mental health were
significantly and positively correlated with SWB. It was found that mental health was the mediating
factor which impinged on social support and SWB through the analysis and inspection of mediating
effect.

Mental health education endeavors to help students think positively and promote their experience
of positive emotions, cultivate positive personality traits as well as facilitate the construction of
excellent interpersonal relationships via the elaboration of rudimentary knowledge regarding mental
health and the implantation of approaches and skills in this respect, in order to precaution against
psychological disease, optimize mental quality and tap into psychological potential. It is committed
to the alteration of students’ cognition, sentiment, personality, and interpersonal relations towards a
positive direction, thus making students become positive. Its fundamental task is to bring
individuals’ strength and potential into full play and endow them with enduring happiness in the
course of constant pursuit of self-improvement and self-fulfilling.

In mental health education, great efforts should be made to help students to perceive the world in
a more positive manner, confront everything with an optimistic attitude, surmount all the difficulties
with a strong will, and be a sanguine person with rational and accurate attribution of success or
failure. Students are supposed to manage their own emotions, strive to contain negative feelings,
maintain positive and steady mood and be hopeful about the prospect of future, so that they can be
emotionally upbeat. Besides, students also ought to pay attention to their latent positive
psychological quality, develop optimistic personal traits, be a person of sound personality, give full
play of their potentials and finally achieve sense of blissfulness through self-realization. To improve
the capabilities of interpersonal communication skills will be of great benefit, because individuals
can obtain a sense of security and belonging in a favorable relationship. People can might as well
gain emotional support through association with others, feel consoled and have spiritual
centiment and pleasure for interpersonal relations function as a kind of social supporting system.

The integration with physical education  Researches indicate that constant participation in
physical exercise plays a significant role in improving one’s SWB. Carter (1977) contrived to find
out if people who worked out regularly were happier than those that did not, discovering that
physical exercise was positively related to sense of well-being with their correlation coefficient
being 0.27. Wu Hao (2015) carried out a research on the relations among physical exercise, students’
social support and SWB, with the results being that the aforementioned three elements were
positively correlated and that university students who constantly work out would boost their social
support and SWB.

Physical exercise can enhance subjective well-being mainly by virtue of building up the body.
Those who frequently participate in physical activities can fortify their fitness and hence have a
wholesome and robust torso. Free of the distress from corporeal pain constitutes the foundation for
enjoying a happy life. Physical exercises will be of immense assistance to reduce such negative
emotions like nervousness, anxiety, and depression, and release pressure, as well as boost optimism,
confidence, self-esteem and Self-efficacy, which will help individuals to obtain felicity in a good
mood. Moreover, Physical exercises are conducive to the development of interpersonal relationships. Physical exercises often entail the close collaboration and cooperation with other people, thus it will effectively intensify social ties and favorable interpersonal relations.

Institutions of higher learning must integrate happiness education with physical education, attach great importance to the construction and development of the curriculum involving physical education and require students to obtain stipulated credits for PE subject. At the same time, such concrete measures as the building of stadiums, the renovation of sports facilities, the development of training programs, the guarantee of exercise time, the guidance for physical activities and so forth, should be made to ensure students’ frequent engagement in physical exercises and cultivation of good exercise habits. In a nutshell, students can be both mentally and physically healthy person through physical exercises, and thus attain the goal of being happy without the disturbance from bodily ailments and mental distress.

The Creation of a Happy Campus

In addition to developing their positive psychological traits by providing happiness education course, colleges and universities should make strenuous efforts to build a happy campus. While creating a happy campus, schools of higher learning should be committed to the educational philosophy of putting students first, appreciating and encouraging students, and turning them into excellent persons.

The improvement of material conditions of campus, and the creation of a favorable environment for life and study constitute a premise and foundation for securing student’s well-being. For one thing, to make school campus greener, more beautiful, more clean as well as more optimized will be of great benefit for students to study and live merrily, be happy and healthy both physically and mentally. For another, Great attention should be paid to the construction of school infrastructure, and the amelioration of conditions of such places as teaching buildings, laboratory, library, playground, canteen, as well as the improvement of internet technology and others, so as to meet students’ basic needs and make them feel more comfortable and pleased.

Much prominence should be given on the formation of campus culture, and the creation of an upbeat and aspiring atmosphere of education, which stands for the inexorable requirement of students’ profound happiness. To this end, on the one hand, universities and colleges ought to carry out various campus cultural activities which are in line with the characteristics of students’ physical and mental development, through which students can accomplish their self-value, and objective, and hence be happy. On the other hand, with the assistance provided by power of media like campus newspaper, bulletin board, radio station and school network, schools should strive for a shared cultural paradise for both teachers and students alike, and shape a campus culture with perpetual pursuit of truth, benevolence and beauty as its tenet.

Colleges should be dedicated to the right approach to internal relations and the establishment of harmonious and amicable interpersonal relationships. Institutions of higher learning must pay attention to the formulation professional ethics and morality among teachers and the creation of student-faculty relations featuring democracy, equality, sincerity and friendliness. Students can only feel happy without the absence of acceptance and care provided by teachers. Besides, schools should channel students with quality service by enhancing management and service level, and strengthen service awareness and attitudes, so that students can be felicitous with due respect and concern shown by managerial personnel. Additionally, great efforts should be made to develop students’ interpersonal communication capabilities and enhance interactions amid students. Therefore, students will develop friendship with a strong sense of belonging, and obtain happiness accompanied by a favorable peer relationship.

Great importance must be attached to the construction of campus safety and the safeguarding of peaceful and secure school environment. It is necessary for schools to equip with security persons and advanced security facilities. In addition, universities should provide security personnel with regular training so that they can improve their skills regarding safeguarding the security of school and cope with safety incidents in a more effective fashion. Furthermore, much effort must be made
to formulate and improve security management systems, and see to it that they are in the charge of specially assigned personnel and put in place with a clear-cut division of responsibility in order to guarantee the safety of lives and property. Moreover, the establishment of a perfect campus security mechanism must be ensured to lower the possibility of school safety accidents.

References


