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An Empirical Study on Interactive Group Counseling for Enhancing College Students' Self-Confidence Based on the Unity of Knowledge and Action

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Abstract: Self-confidence serves as a fundamental indicator of psychological well-being and adaptive development among university populations. Grounded in the traditional Chinese philosophical principle of the unity of knowledge and action, this study introduces a culturally responsive framework that bridges cognitive understanding with behavioral practice in higher education settings. We propose a structured interactive group counseling protocol comprising five sequential phases: foundational self-awareness, collaborative peer support, guided situational rehearsal, applied real-world engagement, and systematic reflective internalization. To empirically validate this approach, a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design with a matched control group is implemented. Primary outcome measurement relies on the Young Students' Self-Confidence Questionnaire, while qualitative triangulation is achieved through detailed session transcripts, participant reflection logs, and trained facilitator assessments. The proposed counseling framework is hypothesized to yield statistically significant improvements across multidimensional confidence constructs, including intellectual competence, interpersonal efficacy, stress coping mechanisms, and academic achievement orientation. Subsequent data analysis will rigorously employ mixed-methods techniques to comprehensively evaluate both quantitative score variations and qualitative thematic shifts. By systematically converting theoretical self-concept into iterative behavioral practice, this research offers a scalable, evidence-based methodology for university counseling centers. Ultimately, the findings aim to inform institutional mental health initiatives, ideological education curricula, and holistic student development programs. This comprehensive evaluation strategy ensures robust validation.

Keywords: group counseling; self-confidence; college students; mental health; knowledge-action integration

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1. Introduction

Strengthening college students' mental health education is an important task for higher education institutions seeking to foster balanced development. China's Special Action Plan for Strengthening and Improving Student Mental Health in the New Era (2023–2025) calls for the integration of moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and practical education to improve students' psychological literacy and self-management capacity. This policy orientation suggests that university mental health work should not be limited to crisis response or the transmission of psychological knowledge. It should also cultivate self-esteem, confidence, emotional balance, and other positive qualities that support students' long-term growth [1].

The Guidelines for Mental Health Education for Students in Higher Education Institutions further require universities to combine developmental and preventive approaches and to develop students' psychological potential. Self-confidence is a particularly important psychological resource when students face academic pressure, interpersonal interaction, career choice, and social adaptation. Students with low

confidence often avoid expression, underestimate their abilities, and rely heavily on external evaluation. They may also show insufficient initiative in learning, peer communication, and career exploration [2].

In many campus practices, confidence education is delivered through lectures, short activities, or motivational sharing. Such approaches may help students understand the importance of confidence, but they do not necessarily transform behavior. Some students can explain positive self-talk, strength identification, and goal management in class, yet still hesitate to speak, try, or persist in real situations [2]. This gap between knowing and doing is the practical starting point of the present study.

The present study therefore treats self-confidence enhancement as a process of behavioral learning rather than a process of persuasion. Its central concern is how students can move from recognizing their strengths to using them in specific interpersonal, academic, and developmental situations. This concern is particularly relevant for applied universities, where students are expected to develop practical competence, social adaptability, and career readiness. A structured program that links self-understanding with repeated action may help students build a more stable sense of agency [2].

Although previous studies have discussed confidence, self-efficacy, and self-acceptance among college students, fewer studies have converted a traditional Chinese educational concept into a structured and testable counseling program. There is also a need to connect the content of group sessions with measurable outcomes [3]. This paper addresses that need by linking the unity of knowledge and action with a sequence of counseling activities and an empirical evaluation plan.

2. Theoretical Basis and Research Hypotheses

2.1. The Psychological-Educational Meaning of the Unity of Knowledge and Action

The unity of knowledge and action holds that genuine knowledge is inherently inseparable from practice. Knowledge is tested, deepened, and completed through action. When applied to college mental health education, this principle should not be treated as an abstract philosophical concept but rather operationalized as a counseling framework in which cognition, emotion, and behavior reciprocally reinforce one another. Empirical evidence indicates that this integrative perspective helps clarify why psychological awareness often fails to translate into sustained behavioral change among college students.

In self-confidence training, knowledge encompasses students' awareness of their personal strengths, limiting beliefs, and developmental experiences. Action includes public expression, role enactment, task-based challenges, and authentic behavioral engagement. Unity manifests as iterative refinement of self-evaluation through experiential feedback generated by action. Consequently, confidence is not conceived as a static internal state but emerges progressively as students enact competence across academic and social contexts [4].

2.2. Mechanisms of Interactive Group Counseling

Self-confidence is not merely verbal encouragement, nor is it unrealistic self-inflation. It reflects a positive trust in one's physical, psychological, and social functioning. The Young Students' Self-Confidence Questionnaire conceptualizes confidence across dimensions including intellectual confidence, interpersonal confidence, quality-related confidence, coping confidence, and achievement confidence. Empirical findings further indicate strong associations between confidence and traits such as courage and self-reliance among young students. These insights support an integrated approach to confidence development—one that combines cognitive restructuring with opportunities for successful action and sustained social support.

Interactive group counseling offers a conducive setting for such development. Within a safe and supportive group context, participants engage in self-disclosure, receive peer feedback, participate in role-play, and collaborate on shared tasks. These activities help alleviate feelings of isolation and foster experiences of mutual understanding and acceptance. A meta-analytic review of mental health support strategies for Chinese college

students identified group counseling as both effective and widely implementable in university environments. Experiential group approaches have also demonstrated measurable benefits for self-acceptance and self-efficacy. Therefore, this study posits that a knowledge–action integrated counseling model can enhance students' overall self-confidence, particularly in interpersonal, coping, and achievement-related domains [1, 5].

2.3. Operational Definition and Research Hypotheses

In this study, self-confidence is operationally defined as students' positive and realistic belief in their ability to understand themselves, express themselves, respond to challenges, and complete meaningful tasks. It is not equated with unconditional optimism. Rather, it is a developmental quality grounded in self-awareness, observable behavioral patterns, and constructive social feedback [6]. Interactive group counseling is defined as a structured group process involving dialogue, experiential activities, peer feedback, behavioral practice, and reflective review following each session.

Three hypotheses guide the empirical examination. First, students in the experimental group will demonstrate higher total self-confidence scores post-program compared to pre-program assessment. Second, the experimental group will exhibit significantly greater gains than the comparison group. Third, the most pronounced improvements will occur in interpersonal expression, coping confidence, and achievement confidence—dimensions directly engaged through group-based tasks. These hypotheses will be evaluated using both quantitative statistical analysis and qualitative process data [7].

3. Research Design

3.1. Participants and Ethical Requirements

The study is designed as a quasi-experimental project at Suzhou University of Technology [8]. Undergraduate students who voluntarily apply for confidence training may be recruited through mental health courses, counselor recommendation, and self-registration. Before formal participation, students complete a self-confidence screening questionnaire and a brief interview. Those with moderate or low self-confidence and no indication of severe psychological crisis risk are eligible for inclusion. To enhance internal validity, an experimental group and a comparison group are formed, matched on gender, grade, major category, and baseline confidence level.

All participants sign an informed consent form outlining the purpose, activities, confidentiality provisions, and right to withdraw at any stage. The program is framed as developmental counseling support rather than clinical intervention. Should any participant exhibit signs of significant psychological distress during screening or group sessions, the facilitator promptly refers the individual to the university counseling center and excludes the case from the group-based developmental program [9].

3.2. Instruments and Data Sources

The Young Students' Self-Confidence Questionnaire serves as the primary quantitative instrument, designed to assess confidence across intellectual, interpersonal, coping, and achievement domains. Where feasible, the General Self-Efficacy Scale or a self-esteem scale may be administered as supplementary measures to explore potential co-variation between self-confidence and related psychological constructs [10].

Quantitative data should be triangulated with qualitative materials, including attendance records, session feedback forms, reflection journals, facilitator observations, and brief exit interviews. This mixed-methods approach avoids overreliance on post-intervention scores and enables examination of how students articulate shifts in self-understanding, expressive capacity, perseverance, and peer support.

Prior to formal analysis, questionnaire data must undergo scrutiny for missing values, inconsistent response patterns, and internal consistency reliability. Qualitative materials should be preserved in original form, and a preliminary coding framework established. Convergent patterns across questionnaire responses, facilitator observations, and student

reflections enhance interpretive credibility; divergent findings warrant explicit discussion rather than omission [11].

3.3. Data Analysis

Prior to evaluating the effects of the program, baseline characteristics between the experimental and comparison groups should be assessed. If no statistically significant differences are observed at pre-test, within-group changes may be analyzed using paired-sample *t* tests, and between-group post-test differences may be examined using independent-sample *t* tests. When baseline disparities are present, analysis of covariance is recommended, with pre-test scores serving as covariates. For small-group counseling research, effect sizes must accompany statistical significance indicators. Qualitative data should be systematically coded according to four thematic categories: self-understanding, expressive behavior, task persistence, and peer support.

3.4. Implementation Procedure and Data Management

The empirical procedure comprises recruitment, screening, informed consent, pre-test, group-based learning activities, post-test, and follow-up. Identical instructions must be applied at each measurement point to minimize procedural variability. Participants' names shall be replaced with anonymized codes prior to data entry. Questionnaire responses, interview notes, and reflection journals must be stored separately from any personally identifiable information [12]. Access to identifiable materials is restricted exclusively to authorized members of the research team.

As this study focuses on psychological education rather than clinical care, no therapeutic outcomes should be implied or guaranteed. The facilitator shall clarify that the program supports confidence development through structured learning and guided practice. Should any participant experience emotional discomfort during the sessions, timely individual support or appropriate referral services shall be provided. These safeguards uphold participant welfare and enhance the methodological rigor of the study.

4. Interactive Group Counseling Program

4.1. General Framework

The counseling model operationalizes the integration of knowledge and action through a four-phase training structure: knowing, practicing, acting, and reflecting. First, students examine cognitive patterns that contribute to low self-confidence. Second, they receive supportive feedback and emotional affirmation within the group setting. Third, they engage in observable behavioral tasks via situational rehearsal and real-world application. Fourth, they consolidate these experiences into refined self-perceptions through guided review and reflection. Empirical findings indicate that group-based approaches focused on self-awareness can strengthen self-esteem and self-acceptance among Chinese college students. Consequently, each group interaction serves as a conduit linking self-insight, behavioral engagement, and experiential integration.

4.2. Session Design

The program comprises eight weekly sessions, each approximately 90 minutes in duration. The first session establishes group safety, clarifies shared expectations, and defines collective participation goals. The second session, titled "Knowing the Real Self," employs strength cards, life timelines, and self-labeling exercises to enhance awareness of personal strengths and resources. The third session identifies unhelpful internal narratives associated with low confidence, such as "I cannot do it" or "others will reject me." The fourth session utilizes peer mirroring, affirming feedback, and supportive inquiry to foster a more balanced and realistic self-perception.

The fifth session develops expressive and presentational skills through structured one-minute speeches, situational speaking tasks, and guided role-play activities. The sixth session introduces progressively challenging real-world tasks to support the transfer of group-based learning into everyday contexts. The seventh session reflects on implementation experiences by examining encountered obstacles, effective strategies, and

newly observed behavioral patterns [13]. The final session consolidates learning through the creation of a personal confidence growth portfolio and the formulation of a sustainable action plan. This progression supports students in moving systematically from self-awareness to purposeful action and, ultimately, to enduring internalization.

4.3. Interactive Techniques

Facilitators may employ warm-up activities, open-ended questioning, peer feedback, role play, behavioral experiments, and reflection journals. For students with low confidence, direct public performance may induce excessive pressure; thus, task difficulty should progress incrementally—from dyadic sharing to small-group expression and finally to whole-group presentation. The emphasis lies not on entertainment, but on fostering self-understanding, behavioral practice, and reflective engagement.

4.4. Principles for Program Implementation

Several implementation principles are essential. First, the program should follow a progressive design: students should not be assigned demanding tasks before trust and foundational participation have been established. Second, feedback must be specific rather than generic; peers and facilitators should highlight concrete behaviors—such as clarity of expression, perseverance, or openness to new challenges—rather than offering vague praise [14]. Third, each session must incorporate a structured reflection component to support the transformation of experiential learning into self-awareness.

Fourth, out-of-session tasks should be brief, observable, and grounded in authentic campus contexts—for example, asking one question during class, initiating a brief peer conversation, volunteering for a defined group role, or completing a previously postponed academic task [15]. Fifth, facilitators must ensure the group environment remains collaborative rather than competitive; the objective is to help students accumulate personally meaningful evidence of capability, not to foster comparative evaluation. Collectively, these principles uphold the integration of theory and practice.

5. Empirical Testing and Quality Control

To ensure the study is genuinely empirical, pre-test and post-test procedures must employ identical instruments, scoring rules, and statistical criteria. If the experimental group demonstrates significant improvement in overall self-confidence as well as in interpersonal, coping, or achievement-related dimensions, while the comparison group shows no comparable change, the program may be regarded as preliminarily effective. Supplementary qualitative evidence—such as reflection journals and interviews—can further enrich interpretation: recurring themes like increased willingness to speak, greater acceptance of personal limitations, enhanced task engagement, and heightened persistence following setbacks help illuminate the underlying psychological mechanisms associated with observed quantitative changes.

Results should be reported with sufficient statistical transparency. A formal paper must include descriptions of sample characteristics, baseline equivalence between groups, within-group changes, between-group differences at post-test, and, where available, follow-up outcomes. When data permit, comparative analysis across distinct dimensions is also recommended. Such comprehensive reporting clarifies not only whether the program yields measurable effects, but also which domains show the strongest responsiveness.

Interpretation of findings should remain cautious. Observed improvement limited to the experimental group may suggest program utility, yet conclusions must account for sample size, initial group equivalence, and measurement reliability. Where certain dimensions exhibit stronger gains than others, discussion should explicitly link those patterns to corresponding session content—for instance, interpersonal confidence may respond more readily to structured speaking opportunities and peer feedback, whereas achievement-related confidence may require extended real-world application.

Quality control encompasses program standardization, process supervision, and longitudinal evaluation. Each session must specify clear objectives, procedural steps, time

allocation, and facilitator documentation. Facilitators should possess training in mental health education or group counseling and conduct systematic session reviews to address issues such as prolonged silence, excessive self-disclosure, or unconstructive peer feedback. Given the context-dependent nature of confidence development, a follow-up assessment conducted four to eight weeks after program completion is recommended [16]. This assessment can evaluate whether participants apply insights gained in the group setting to classroom learning, daily interpersonal interactions, and career-related decision-making.

Program fidelity must be systematically monitored. Facilitators should verify that each session adheres to its designated thematic focus and consistently applies core techniques. When multiple facilitators lead separate groups, they must undergo uniform training and implement the same session manual. A brief fidelity checklist completed after each session supports consistency and helps distinguish effects attributable to the program design from those arising from individual facilitator style.

6. Discussion

The value of an interactive group counseling model grounded in the unity of knowledge and action lies in helping students deepen self-understanding through experiential engagement. Many experiences of low self-confidence do not stem from a fundamental lack of capability, but rather from negative self-interpretation, overgeneralization of past setbacks, and avoidance of authentic behavioral engagement. Peer interaction within the group setting disrupts unidirectional self-evaluation patterns. Graded, achievable tasks enable participants to accumulate concrete success experiences, supporting the gradual shift from tentative statements such as "I tried" to affirming narratives like "I completed it."

This model holds relevance for both mental health education and ideological and political education. The principle of integrating knowledge with practice originates in classical Chinese philosophical traditions, while interactive group counseling offers a structured, practice-oriented approach to operationalize this principle in student development. Their integration may support university-level mental health education in transitioning from conceptual awareness to sustained behavioral application, from isolated one-off activities to systematic skill-building, and from reactive problem resolution toward proactive cultivation of psychological strengths. Nevertheless, conclusions drawn from this work must remain appropriately circumscribed [17]. Robust causal inference requires empirical validation through representative samples, psychometrically sound measurement instruments, and longitudinal follow-up data.

A further strength of the model is its intentional synthesis of culturally resonant frameworks with evidence-informed counseling practices. While many externally developed psychological approaches demonstrate efficacy, students may perceive them as abstract or contextually distant techniques. By anchoring self-confidence development in a familiar philosophical concept, the program enhances receptivity and meaningful engagement with psychological learning [18]. Crucially, the model does not treat traditional thought as rhetorical ornamentation; its validity rests on whether the underlying idea is translated into observable facilitation procedures and empirically verifiable developmental outcomes.

For institutional implementation, the model can be integrated into mental health literacy courses, first-year transition initiatives, class-based support activities, and career development programming. It is particularly well-suited for students who possess foundational understanding of positive psychological concepts yet lack accessible, low-risk opportunities for behavioral rehearsal. Additionally, the model supports counselors in designing interventions that are time-efficient, clearly structured, and amenable to systematic evaluation—features that enhance practicality within typical university counseling service contexts.

Several methodological limitations warrant consideration. First, self-selection into confidence-building activities may introduce motivation-related bias, as volunteers often

exhibit higher baseline readiness for change than non-participants. Second, reliance on self-report instruments carries inherent risks of social desirability influence or transient mood effects. Third, short-term gains observed immediately after group participation do not guarantee enduring behavioral or attitudinal shifts. To address these concerns, future research should triangulate data using self-reports, direct behavioral observation, and longitudinal assessment. Expanding sample size and incorporating randomized assignment—where ethically and logistically feasible—would further strengthen the evidentiary foundation.

Future implementation efforts should also explore differential responsiveness across student subgroups [3]. For instance, freshmen may benefit most from activities emphasizing interpersonal connection and environmental adaptation, whereas upper-year students may require confidence-building strategies linked to internship performance, job search processes, and vocational decision-making. Disciplinary background may similarly moderate responses to specific modalities—such as public speaking exercises, collaborative problem-solving tasks, or guided reflective writing. Systematic comparison across these dimensions would allow universities to tailor delivery rather than apply a uniform protocol. Moreover, counselor training quality merits focused attention in future studies, as facilitator competence significantly influences participant engagement, psychological safety, and willingness to share openly.

In practice, continuous refinement through iterative feedback is essential. After each implementation cycle, facilitators may systematically review attendance patterns, depth of participation, quality of written reflections, and students' reported challenges. These insights can inform targeted adjustments—such as calibrating task complexity or pacing session flow—while preserving the model's foundational structure [7]. Such responsiveness ensures alignment with students' evolving developmental needs and contextual constraints. This adaptability is especially vital in routine university counseling settings, where scheduling variability, differing levels of student readiness, and shifting group dynamics occur across semesters. Feedback documentation also supports program fidelity, cross-cohort comparison, implementation reporting, and evidence-based advocacy for sustained institutional investment in confidence development as an integral component of student support services.

7. Conclusion

This paper develops an interactive group counseling framework to enhance college students' self-confidence, grounded in the integration of knowledge and action. The model begins with self-awareness, leverages peer interaction as a catalyst, centers on behavioral tasks, and closes with reflective internalization. It addresses the common gap between knowing confidence-building strategies and consistently applying them. Future research should implement the program with rigorous pre-test, post-test, and follow-up assessments, and examine its effectiveness across academic years, disciplines, and student subgroups. Only through such empirical validation can the framework evolve from a theoretically informed design into an evidence-based educational intervention.

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