Exploration of Teaching Reform on Interpersonal Relationship Themes in College Mental Health Education Courses

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Abstract: *The interpersonal relationship theme in college mental health education courses suffers from issues such as static teaching content, inadequate identification of cognitive biases, and a disconnect between teaching logic and the dynamic characteristics of relationships. Based on the Social and Emotional Learning theory and relational development psychology, this study first deconstructs a three-dimensional framework of core competencies in interpersonal relationships (relationship cognition, relationship regulation, and relationship construction). It then reveals the oversimplification of relational dynamics in existing curricula and the teaching blind spots corresponding to students' cognitive misjudgments. Furthermore, this study proposes directions for reconstructing teaching logic: shifting from static knowledge to mechanisms of relational situation generation, structurally introducing interaction script analysis, and aligning teaching sequences with the developmental stages of relational tension. On this basis, an integrated and progressive teaching intervention model is constructed, which encompasses reversible regulatory pathways based on conflict nodes, a dual-trigger framework of self-referential and empathic loops, and a hierarchically embedded logic of relationship boundary awareness. This model aims to enhance the alignment between course content and the authentic evolution of relationships, thereby promoting the development of students' situational sensitivity in both cognition and regulation.*

Keywords: *Mental health education; Interpersonal relationship teaching; Reconstruction of teaching logic; Intervention model; Relational dynamics*

Introduction

The existing teaching of interpersonal relationship themes in college mental health education courses mostly focuses on behavioral dimensions such as communication skills and conflict resolution, while it inadequately addresses the inherent dynamics of relationships, their contextual dependence, and students' internal cognitive biases. The course content often simplifies interpersonal interactions into linear sequences or structured formulas, neglecting essential features such as tension fluctuations, role negotiation, and boundary ambiguity. Meanwhile, cognitive patterns formed through students' long-term socialization, such as intention certainty bias and emotional inference loops, have not been effectively intervened. These limitations create a cognitive gap between the course content and students' real-life relational experiences. Based on relational development psychology and the social and emotional learning theory, this study proposes a reform framework centered on relational dynamics from three levels: content deconstruction, reconstruction of teaching logic, and integration of intervention strategies, thereby providing a theoretical reference for the organization of course content and the design of teaching sequences.

1. Content Deconstruction and Cognitive Biases in Interpersonal Relationship Teaching in Colleges

1.1 Dimensional Division of Core Competencies in Interpersonal Relationships and Their Teaching Mapping

For the interpersonal relationship theme in college mental health education courses, the organization of its content needs to be built upon a clear framework of core competency dimensions. Based on the social and emotional learning theory and relational development psychology, researchers can deconstruct interpersonal relationship competence into three interrelated dimensions: the

relationship cognition dimension (involving the identification and interpretation of others' emotions, intentions, and social cues), the relationship regulation dimension (covering self-emotion management, conflict resolution, and boundary maintenance processes), and the relationship construction dimension (including communication strategies, cooperative behaviors, and the unfolding of prosocial tendencies). Each dimension corresponds to different psychological mechanisms, which imposes differentiated requirements for the selection and sequencing of course content. The relationship cognition dimension relies more on situational simulation and attribution training; the relationship regulation dimension requires the interactive presentation of emotional arousal and regulation strategies; and the relationship construction dimension should highlight the integration of interaction scripts and feedback loops[1].

Mapping the above dimensions onto teaching segments requires a re-examination of the sequencing logic of thematic units in existing courses. The common content classifications in current textbooks, such as communication skills, conflict resolution, and empathy training, actually imply cross coverage of different competency dimensions but lack clear corresponding guidance on dimension correspondence. The key to teaching mapping lies in establishing an operational path from dimensions to teaching activities: the relationship cognition dimension can correspond to exercises in interpreting nonverbal signals and perspective-taking; the relationship regulation dimension should be embedded in training on response selection in stressful interactive scenarios; and the relationship construction dimension is suitable for integrating multi-round cooperative tasks with reflective journals. Through the systematic alignment of dimensional division and teaching mapping, educators can prevent interpersonal relationship teaching from falling into a stack of isolated skills and instead form a course structure with an inherent logic of competency development.

1.2 Simplification of Relational Dynamics in Existing Course Content

The interpersonal relationship chapters in current college mental health education courses generally tend to treat complex interpersonal interactions as reproducible static patterns. This simplification is reflected in a flattened description of relationship stages, where phases such as acquaintance, interaction, conflict, and repair are often presented as a linear progressive sequence, while the actual characteristics of repetition, backtracking, and nonlinear evolution in the relational process are ignored. Common communication formulas in teaching materials (such as "I-message" expression and active listening steps) appear in a highly structured form, dividing fluid situational interactions into independently exercisable technical units. While this approach lowers the threshold for beginners, it inadvertently dissolves essential attributes of interpersonal relationships such as uncertainty, ambiguity, and real-time adjustment, thereby creating a cognitive gap between course content and real-life relational experiences.

The simplification of relational dynamics is further reflected in the tendency toward abstraction in case settings and situational descriptions. Course content tends to present interpersonal dilemmas with clear boundaries, such as misunderstandings between friends or dormitory conflicts over daily routines, while it rarely and systematically incorporates ongoing tension in relational dynamics, subtle shifts in identity negotiation processes, and the implicit shaping of interaction trajectories by asymmetric power. The judgment framework that students acquire through the simplified course content often exhibits insufficient explanatory power when they face dynamic evolution in real relationships, and they are prone to attributing relational fluctuations to a single factor or seeking formulaic solutions. Teaching reform needs to confront the limitations of this simplification, preserve the essential characteristics of relational dynamics in content design, and take the reversibility, multifactorial nature, and contextual dependence of relational evolution as important reference coordinates for curriculum reconstruction[2].

1.3 Common Misjudgments in Students' Interpersonal Cognitive Patterns and Their Corresponding Teaching Blind Spots

Before entering mental health education classrooms, college students have already carried with them interpersonal cognitive patterns formed during their long-term socialization. The more common types of misjudgments in these patterns include intention certainty bias (i.e., directly equating others' behaviors with stable intentions), emotional inference loops (inferring the nature of a relationship from one's own emotional states), and unidirectional locking of responsibility attribution (persistently anchoring conflict responsibility either on oneself or on the other party). These misjudgments are not simply a lack of knowledge but are rooted in individuals' habitual interpretation of the relational world and their automatic psychological reactions. If course teaching only imparts correct principles of interpersonal interaction without addressing these deep-seated cognitive biases, students often accept

new knowledge at the conceptual level but still activate their original misjudgment channels in real interpersonal situations.

The existence of the above cognitive biases indicates the teaching blind spots in the existing course content. Current teaching mostly focuses on skill training and attitude guidance at the behavioral level, while it lacks a systematic intervention design for the identification and reconstruction of cognitive schemas. The teaching blind spots are specifically manifested in the following three aspects: the lack of a systematic screening procedure for students' typical misjudgments, which creates a misalignment between the teaching content and the students' actual cognitive starting points; the absence of an analysis of the formation mechanisms of misjudgments, which makes it difficult for students to understand why their own judgments deviate from valid information; and the failure to set targeted cognitive reconstruction tasks, as merely informing students of correct principles can hardly change their entrenched interpretative habits. To fill these blind spots, educators need to introduce metacognitive monitoring tools into teaching, help students identify the automatic patterns in their own interpersonal judgments, and facilitate flexible adjustments of cognitive frameworks through structured feedback loops.

2. Reconstruction of Teaching Logic Oriented Toward Relational Process

2.1 A Teaching Shift from Static Knowledge to the Generative Mechanism of Relational Situations

Traditional interpersonal relationship teaching tends to present interpersonal interaction as independently transmissible knowledge units, such as communication principles, listening skills, or conflict resolution steps. This static knowledge orientation organizes teaching content in a propositional manner, assuming that students can automatically apply the rules in real situations after mastering them. However, interpersonal interaction is essentially a dynamic generative phenomenon: the words, emotions, and behavioral choices in each relational event are constructed in real time under specific contextual constraints, rather than being a simple reproduction of existing knowledge. The core of the teaching shift lies in moving the course focus from "what constitutes effective interpersonal behavior" to "how effective interpersonal behavior is generated in situations," that is, focusing on the constituent elements of relational situations, the interaction of variables in the interactive process, and the real-time adjustment mechanisms of behavioral choices[3].

This teaching shift requires a redefinition of the basic units of course content. Static knowledge modules need to be reorganized into an analytical framework for the generative mechanism of relational situations, including the identification of situational features (such as relationship intimacy, type of interaction goals, and power distribution status), the ways in which situations constrain behavioral choices, and the reverse shaping effect of behavioral outcomes on situations. In teaching activities, communication skills are no longer presented as isolated items but are embedded in a complete chain of situational generation, demonstrating how different behavioral paths change the subsequent trajectory of a relationship. By revealing the dynamic construction process of relational situations, students gradually develop situational sensitivity to interpersonal events during their learning, reduce their excessive reliance on universal rules, and thus enhance the flexibility and adaptability of their interpersonal judgment.

2.2 Structured Introduction of Interaction Script Analysis in Classroom Teaching

An interaction script refers to the mental representational structure that an individual internalizes during long-term socialization and uses to guide interpersonal behavior; it typically includes a definition of the situation, an expected sequence of participant roles, and acceptable response patterns. The introduction of interaction script analysis in mental health education courses can help students conduct a structured examination of their own and others' interpersonal behavior patterns. Educators can design classroom teaching as three progressive stages: script identification, script deconstruction, and script reconstruction. In the script identification stage, students are guided to recognize the automatically activated behavioral procedures in specific interpersonal situations; in the script deconstruction stage, the components of such procedures are broken down, including triggering conditions, behavioral steps, role expectations, and the anticipated outcomes after script execution; and in the script reconstruction stage, students explore alternative scripts for different relational goals under the same situational conditions.

The structured introduction of interaction script analysis changes the distribution of cognitive load

in classroom teaching. Traditional teaching requires students to directly attempt new techniques at the behavioral level, whereas script analysis first lowers the psychological resistance to behavioral change, allowing students to first understand the formation logic and operational boundaries of their own automatic patterns at the metacognitive level. Classroom activities can be organized around typical scripts in common relational situations, such as response patterns after being rejected for help, avoidance of speaking in group discussions, and suppression of emotional expression in intimate relationships. By structurally extracting scripts from the background of unconscious behavior and examining them, students gain a clearer understanding of the range of choices available for their own interpersonal behavior, thereby providing a cognitive foundation for subsequent behavioral regulation.

2.3 The Fitting Design of Teaching Sequences to the Evolving Stages of Relational Tension

In the process of interpersonal relationship development, relationships often go through different stages of tension accumulation, release, and resolution, with each stage corresponding to differentiated psychological needs and behavioral tendencies. If the design of teaching sequences is to fit the evolving patterns of relational tension, the organization order of course units needs to be matched with the temporal logic of relationship development. In the initial stage of a relationship, teaching can focus on impression formation and social cue identification; after entering the relationship deepening stage, the teaching content should shift to gradient control of self-disclosure and boundary negotiation for trust building; when signals of tension accumulation appear in the relationship, the course should introduce emotion regulation and attributional flexibility training; and in the stage of tension release and repair, it needs to cover responsibility communication and relationship restart strategies. This fitting design ensures that when students encounter a specific relationship stage, the course has already provided them with the corresponding cognitive tools and regulation strategies in advance[4].

Embedding the evolving stages of relational tension into teaching sequences also involves a micro-level reconstruction of the activity flow within each unit. Each teaching unit is no longer designed as a smooth progression from low tension to high tension; instead, the teaching process consciously arranges tension fluctuations, allowing students to gradually adapt to changes in cognitive load during relational fluctuations. For example, in a unit on the theme of conflict, educators can first present a neutral situation for information-gathering training, then introduce a mildly incongruent situation for emotion recognition training, and then progressively advance to a high-tension situation requiring position coordination. Through such a gradient design, students experience a simulated curve of relational tension evolution in the teaching environment, and their coping abilities are exercised in stages under controlled conditions. The fitting of teaching sequences to relational tension stages transforms the course from a mere display of isolated skills into a structural mapping of the complete life cycle of relationships.

3. Integration and Progressive Model of Teaching Intervention Strategies

3.1 Reversible Teaching Regulation Pathways Based on Relational Conflict Nodes

Relational conflict often presents directional bifurcations at specific nodes, where different response patterns lead the relationship toward repair, deadlock, or deterioration. The design of reversible teaching regulation pathways based on relational conflict nodes involves identifying several typical critical points of conflict in the curriculum and providing executable positive and negative regulation solutions for each node. The positive regulation pathway points to the progressive steps of relationship repair, while the negative regulation pathway demonstrates common deteriorating responses under the same conflict node and their progressive consequences. By presenting two opposite behavioral choices and their subsequent effects simultaneously at the same node, students can observe the path-dependent characteristics of relational processes in the teaching environment and understand the critical impact of early intervention on the trajectory of conflict.

The teaching implementation of reversible regulation pathways needs to embed conflict nodes into course activities in a sequenced manner. Each node corresponds to a relational situation segment, and students face branching choices in simulated situations, after which the system demonstrates the subsequent interaction evolution triggered by different choices. The design of teaching pathways maintains a reversible characteristic, that is, it allows students to return to a conflict node and attempt another path after observing the consequences of a particular choice, thereby forming a repeated examination of the causal chain in the relational process. This design does not require students to make

correct choices in their initial judgments; instead, it accumulates their cognition of conflict mechanisms through multiple rounds of path traversal. The connections between nodes are also reversible, enabling students to compare the combined effects of regulation measures at different nodes. Through the reversible pathway training on relational conflict nodes, students shift their understanding of interpersonal conflict from static attribution to dynamic regulation, and their intervention abilities are strengthened through controlled repetition in limited scenarios.

3.2 A Dual Teaching Trigger Framework of Self-Referential and Empathic Loops

The development of interpersonal relationship competence depends on the coordinated operation of two psychological loops: the self-referential loop is responsible for identifying one's own emotional states, needs, and boundaries in a relationship; the empathic loop focuses on understanding others' internal experiences and perspectives. These two loops should be activated simultaneously rather than alternately in the teaching trigger framework. Traditional teaching often prioritizes empathy training first, requiring students to think from others' perspectives, yet it neglects the inherent logic that students can hardly empathize effectively when they have not yet clearly perceived their own states. The teaching logic of the dual trigger framework lies in activating the self-referential loop first, and after students have located their own emotions and needs in a specific relational situation, then guiding them to shift to the empathic loop, thereby achieving a cognitive transition from self to others.

In classroom teaching activities, the dual trigger framework can be realized through structured situational sequences. For the same relational situation, the teaching activity first presents an internal state mapping task from a first-person perspective, which requires students to mark their own emotional changes, boundary perceptions, and action tendencies in the situation; the activity then switches to a third-person perspective for inferring others' states, deducing the possible internal experiences and behavioral motivations of the interaction partner. The interval between the triggering of the two loops is intentionally compressed and connected, allowing students to undergo a cognitive transition from self-anchoring to other-mapping within a short period of time. The selection and compilation of teaching materials need to balance the symmetry of the loops, avoiding a situation where the time allocated to the empathic task is significantly longer than that for the self-referential task. The continuous application of the dual trigger framework encourages students to spontaneously form a habit of alternating checks between the two loops in real interpersonal situations, reduces one-dimensional self-centered responses or excessively other-oriented responses, and enhances the bidirectional regulation ability in relational interactions.

3.3 The Hierarchically Embedded Logic of Relationship Boundary Awareness in Teaching Segments

Relationship boundary awareness refers to an individual's ability to recognize and maintain the distinctions of functional, emotional, and responsibility domains between oneself and others in interpersonal interactions. The formation of this awareness should not be taught as an independent module in a concentrated manner; instead, the hierarchically embedded logic advocates for distributing the cultivation of boundary awareness across different cognitive depth levels within various teaching segments. The first level is basic perceptual embedding: in the early stage of the course, educators use nonverbal cue recognition activities to guide students in detecting boundary signals such as spatial distance, eye contact, and response delays in interpersonal interactions. The second level is conceptual clarification embedding: in thematic units such as relationship conflict or self-disclosure, educators introduce a conceptualized description of boundary types, matching the boundary ambiguity situations that students experience during activities with the corresponding terminological framework. The third level is regulation strategy embedding: in complex situations involving responsibility allocation, request refusal, or privacy protection, educators train students in boundary negotiation and maintenance behaviors.

The curricular operability of the hierarchically embedded logic is manifested in different teaching units assuming different functions in the cultivation of boundary awareness. In the unit on communication skills, educators can embed identification exercises for boundary signals rather than delivering a complete lecture on boundary theory; in the unit on intimate relationships, they can embed real-time response training in scenarios of boundary violation; and in the unit on conflict resolution, they can embed structured steps for boundary repair and renegotiation. The teaching content at each level presents a gradient progression in terms of cognitive processing depth and behavioral requirements, thereby avoiding the compression of boundary issues into a single normative guideline. The hierarchically embedded logic also allows different students to be guided to appropriate starting

levels based on their current status of boundary perception, reducing excessive homogenization of teaching content. Through the design of hierarchical embedding throughout the entire course, relationship boundary awareness is no longer an isolated moral preaching content but is transformed into identifiable, discussable, and adjustable psychological operation units.

Conclusion

This study proposes a progressive framework for teaching reform in interpersonal relationships, encompassing content deconstruction, logic reconstruction, and intervention model integration. At the content level, it clarifies the three-dimensional division of core competencies, reveals the simplification tendency of relational dynamics in the curriculum, and identifies the teaching blind spots corresponding to students' cognitive biases. At the logic level, it advocates for shifting the teaching focus to the analysis of the generative mechanism of relational situations, introducing interaction script analysis, and fitting teaching sequences to the evolving stages of relational tension. At the intervention level, it constructs reversible regulation pathways based on conflict nodes, a dual trigger framework of self-referential and empathic loops, and a hierarchically embedded logic of boundary awareness. Future directions include the development of matching assessment tools to examine the independent and interactive effects of intervention components, as well as the investigation of the dose effect of tension fitting in teaching sequences and its impact on learning transfer.

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