The Development of Perceived Campus Caring Scale in a University-Based Sample in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a study on the development and validation of a 44-item Perceived Campus Caring Scale (PCCS) of 1,520 students in a university of Hong Kong. Factor analyses using principle-components extraction with varimax rotation yielded 7 factors with 44 items, namely, Faculty support, Non-faculty Support, Peer Relationship, Sense of Detachment, Sense of Belonging, Caring Attitude, Campus Involvement. The internal consistency was high for the 7 factors, ranging from Cronbach's α =0.77 to 0.87. Correlations between the PCCS and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) indicated good convergent validity of the PCCS. Except the Sense of Detachment subscale, which indicated a negative correlation with SWLS, the other six subscales have positive correlation with the scale. Students who experienced more caring on campus demonstrated a higher level of satisfaction with life.

Keywords: On-campus Relationship; Caring; Satisfaction with Life Scale; University Students

Introduction

As generally used, the term caring is an abstraction often used to denote a wide range of attitudes and behaviors. Because of its complexity, any definition about the nature of caring, will inevitably face certain challenges. It is difficult to have a clear, bounded definition of a construct that involves multiple behaviors, cognitions, and feelings [1,2]. It has been examined as an orientation for moral reasoning in connection with moral development [3,4] and is used as synonymous with prosocial behavior, empathy, helping, and compassion [5]. Caring can be regarded as a way of being in a relationship [3] which is interactive and communicative, interdependent and connective [6], reciprocal [7] and mutual [8]. It can serve as a social practice essential to the maintenance of harmony and restraint [9-14] and to make the well-being of others [15].

Traditionally, family, school, and church have been agencies for developing caring behavior and attitude of young people. Today, the school remains as one of the chief places to develop and nurture an ethic of care [4,8,16-18] and as an ideal setting for developing caring communities. Research has suggested that effective schools tend to foster a higher degree of caring and achievement [7,19-23]. It has been shown that students do expect a caring learning environment [24-28]. They view caring teachers as those who are authentic genuinely interested in students; these educators are viewed as an integral part of the school culture.

How to develop a caring environment that fosters effective learning of students has become an important goal of educational institutions. Despite students’ expectation for a caring learning environment, there are no studies on the measurement of caring atmosphere on a college campus. The present research reports the development and psychometric characteristics of an instrument entitled the Perceived Campus Caring Scale (PCCS), which assesses the caring magnitude of on campus learning of undergraduates in Hong Kong.

The importance of caring in teaching and learning

Students entering into colleges or universities experience a host of challenges, including discovering emotions, feelings, independence and achievement. Inadequate adjustment to these challenges produce elevated risk for depression, anxiety and interpersonal conflict, and may result in engaging in relatively high rates of risky behaviors, such as unprotected intercourse, and illegal drug use [29]. The importance of encouraging a caring school culture has reached many school campuses and many school districts have specific language in their overall goals to provide a safe and caring school environment for students [30-33]. Both teaching and non-teaching personnel should work together to build caring relationships with students and to provide support that help remove barriers to learning and to create an atmosphere that encourages mutual support, caring and sense of community [34]. Research has indicated that the caring attitude of faculty members and non-faculty members could produce an 'empathetic attunement' which could have positive effects on students’ academic performance and help decrease their at-risk behaviors [35]. Apart from building a sense of connection between the students and faculty members, the caring attitude of faculty and non-faculty members could soothe the negative feelings of the students who are affectively or emotionally at risk and help them feel being supported.

A positive and caring learning climate is predictive of academic achievement, healthy development and safety of young people [31,36-38] It also has significant positive impact on learning for those with learning difficulties and problem behaviors [34,39,40]. Students with behavioral and emotional problems are often less successful in learning
interactive and communicative, is based upon different caring acts, no matter verbal or non-verbal, expressive or instrumental behaviors. In a learning environment, these include behaviors that attend to the social, affective and academic needs of the students, and a personal value of willingness to respond, to take responsibility for human error and to persist with difficult students [18]. Thus, caring in school settings is multidimensional in nature. It is based on an open attitude to care which results in some kind of responsive action, action-oriented or cognitive-oriented helping behaviors, to establish relationships of caring, trust, faith, hope, sensitivity, touch, empathy, and warmth among students and teachers [3].

In spite of its importance, there is little research on on-campus caring. Though there has been a significant development in establishing caring as a viable moral and political concept in the past twenty-five years [52], caring remains rather obscure particularly in a learning environment. There are several instruments and models on the study of caring behaviors but most are in healthcare settings [53]. These include the Caring Dimensions Inventory (CDI) on categories of caring [53] and the Caring Behaviors Inventory [54]. These instruments are helpful in understanding different aspects of caring pertaining to healthcare settings.

While these instruments have not been evaluated in academic settings, they provide a base on how to measure caring relationships. There is a scarcity of local studies investigating on-campus caring in Hong Kong. The present research reports a study to examine the psychometric properties of the 44-item Perceived Campus Caring Scale (PCCS) which was developed to assess the caring experiences of students in university in Hong Kong.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants came from Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU). An approval for the study had been solicited from the Student Affairs Office of HKBU. With the help from the office, email invitations with consent to participate in the study through an online link to a self-administered questionnaire including the Perceived Campus Caring Scale (PCCS) and a Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) [55] were sent to all students of HKBU who were to complete it during the 10-day period of the study. A total of 1,520 students aged between 20 to 36 years (M=20.63, SD=1.67) with a response rate of 29.7% had completed the questionnaire upon the end of the survey period. Among them, 66.2% were female and 33.8% were male students. 44.9% of them had been living in the university's dormitory from 1 to 48 months with an average length of 10 months.

Measures

Perceived campus caring scale (PCCS): An initial pool of 97-item on caring was constructed based on literature review, qualitative interviews with 10 students and 5 counselors of HKBU. The first pilot study with the 97-item self-administered questionnaire was conducted with 146 students. For each item, the student responded on a 5-point Likert scale with an agreement continuum, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Individual items with a kurtosis greater than 1 or less than -1 were removed leaving 83 items. Coefficient alpha of the 83 items was 0.95.

In the second pilot study, emails and reminders were sent to a random sample of 2,000 students to invite them to participate in the study with the 83-item self-administered PCCS on-line. Three hundred forty nine students completed the questionnaire with a response rate of
The conceptual structure of PCCS was explored using exploratory factor analysis of the PCCS of university undergraduates in a Chinese setting. The caring environment on campus tended to have a higher level of satisfaction with life as reported by students in the study (Table 4). All seven caring factors were significantly correlated with the levels of satisfaction with life as reported by students in the study (Table 4). The results of the current study must be considered in the context of several limitations. First, the participants in this study were mostly university undergraduates from a university with religious background. This may limit the generalizability of our findings to teaching and learning environments with other religious or non-religious background. Moreover, the PCCS was based on self-report measures from the perspective of university undergraduates. There was a possibility for faking good as the results of PCCS were based on only those who responded to the survey. Multiple perspectives.

Results

Factor structure of PCCS by exploratory factor analysis

A factor analysis was conducted on the 44 PCCS items using principle-components method of extraction with varimax rotation. Seven factors were obtained explaining 54.73% of the items variance. The factors were named Faculty Support, Peer Relationship, Sense of Detachment, Caring Attitude, Campus Involvement, Non-faculty Support, and Sense of Belonging. The definitions of the factors are presented in Table 1.

Reliability of the 44-item PCCS

The reliability of the PCCS, scales Cronbach’s alpha and total percentage of variance were examined (Table 2). The PCCS has high reliability (Cronbach’s α = 0.92) and the reliability (Cronbach’s α) of its subscales are ranged from 0.77 to 0.87. It indicates high internal consistency of both the PCCS and its subscales.

Inter-correlation coefficients between the subscales have demonstrated good reliability and validity of the PCCS. Table 3 showed the correlation matrix between the subscales with correlation coefficients (r) ranging from 0.14 to 0.75 (p<0.001). There was no indication of multicollinearity. Each subscale is therefore able to show the correlation matrix between the subscales with correlation coefficients (r) ranging from 0.14 to 0.75 (p<0.001). There was no indication of multicollinearity. Each subscale is therefore able to demonstrate good reliability, as well as convergent and discriminant validity [57]. It has been translated into Chinese version and has been well used in mainland China and Hong Kong with Cronbach’s α ranging from 0.75 to 0.85 [58]. As the level of SWLS of the students is outside the theme of this paper, it will be reported in another article.

Discussion

The current study is the first attempt to explore the dimensionality of the PCCS of university undergraduates in a Chinese setting. The conceptual structure of PCCS was explored using exploratory factor analysis, and to investigate the factorial invariance of the related models. The findings arising from this validation study are generally encouraging, suggesting that the PCCS assesses university students’ perception of on-campus caring relationships on 7 dimensions, including Faculty Support, Non-faculty Support, Peer Relationship, Campus Involvement, Caring Attitude, Sense of Belonging and Sense of Detachment.

Results from this study are consistent with previous studies on caring and acknowledges the important roles of caring supports from teaching faculty and non-teaching faculty members, peers relationships, and engagement in co-curriculum activities on students’ learning [30-34]. The six subscales except the Sense of Detachment subscale have positive correlation with SWLS. As the Sense of Detachment subscale is inverted, its negative relationship with SWLS in fact is consistent with the suggestion that students who have less sense of detachment endorse more on the PCCS score. The administration of the PCCS can help faculty members to become more aware of the campus caring atmosphere which could directly or indirectly affect the efficacy of teaching and learning of students. As compared with previous research [34,35], this study has created a concept of campus caring. It shows that students’ senses of belonging and detachment with their learning environments are significant components for measuring their subjective caring experiences on campus. The PCCS is helpful for measuring teaching and learning success, and therefore students’ subjective experiences on-campus caring should be incorporated into evaluation of outcomes of on-campus teaching and learning activities. The findings also shed light on the importance of reciprocal efforts of students, teaching faculty and non-teaching faculty members in developing caring teaching and learning environment for students.

The caring atmosphere at a school or university may well be a reflection of the caring attitude in society at large. It is not surprising to discover school bullying and substance abuse in school in a society which is characterized by social segregation and alienation. As studying in a less caring environment could be stressful and brings a poor sense of security to students, how to develop a curriculum as well as an extra-curriculum that can enhance the caring attitude of students has become an important goal of education. The PCCS provides information about the caring environment from the students’ perspective. It could serve as an important indicator aiding the development of activities, albeit co-curriculum or extra-curriculum activities, so as to foster the school caring environment.

Apart from the contribution to the caring environment of the school, the PCCS can be a very useful tool for individual counselors to identify students at risk of social isolation and alienation in relation to their life on campus. With the assistance of the PCCS, the counselors can tailor-make counseling services and develop early intervention for students who have difficulty initiating or maintaining relationships with fellow students as well as with faculty members on campus.

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which include students as well as faculty members may constitute a better approach to assessing the construct of PCCS. In addition, as the participants in this study were from a university, further investigation is needed to determine how the current findings can be generated from studies of participants from different teaching and learning environments, including primary, secondary and tertiary educational settings in Hong Kong or China. Nevertheless, this is a pioneer study on the development of the PCCS in Hong Kong. The seven dimensions of the scale provide seven indexes in relation to the caring environment on campus. Further research might be undertaken on the validity of the norms, of the indexes among different teaching and learning environments and settings as well as cultures.
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