The Practical Pathway of Solution-Focused Approach in Heart-to-Heart Talks by University Counselors

Ruixi Li*

School of Computer Science and Technology, Beijing Electronic Science and Technology Institute, Beijing 100070, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Abstract: Contemporary university students are confronted with multiple challenges, including academic pressure, employment anxiety, and interpersonal conflicts. Traditional approaches to heart-to-heart talks often exhibit limitations, such as "over-reliance on problem etiology" and "the marginalization of student agency," which hinder their effectiveness in addressing students' individualized needs and enhancing the efficacy of counselors' work. Grounded in the solution-focused approach (SFA), this study employs a literature review methodology to systematically examine the core tenets of SFA—namely, its "solution-oriented perspective" and emphasis on "accumulating small changes"—as well as key techniques such as empowerment-oriented questioning and action reinforcement. Integrating these elements with the specific context of university counseling dialogues, the paper constructs a three-stage application framework encompassing "pre-session preparation, in-session implementation, and post-session follow-up." This framework is designed to enhance the pertinence and effectiveness of heart-to-heart talks by clarifying conversation goals, focusing on student resources, detailing action steps, and reinforcing outcomes. It aims to provide counselors with actionable guidance while also offering interdisciplinary theoretical support for improving the quality of ideological and political education and mental health counseling in universities. Ultimately, the framework seeks to strengthen students' agency and autonomous problem-solving capabilities.

Keywords: Solution-focused approach (SFA); University counselors; Heart-to-heart talks; Ideological and political education; Mental health; Student agency

1. Introduction

Higher education has entered a phase of high-quality development, characterized by significant changes in the student population structure and their growing environments. The post-00s generation, who now constitute the main student body, faces multiple complex challenges, including academic competition pressure, employment

uncertainty, interpersonal adjustment, and self-identity issues. These challenges demand greater professionalism, pertinence, and effectiveness from university counselors in their heart-to-heart talks [1]. As a core vehicle for ideological and political education and mental health guidance, heart-to-heart talks serve as a crucial pathway for counselors to understand students' ideological trends, resolve their growth confusions, and build positive teacher-student relationships. Their quality directly impacts the overall effectiveness of student affairs work [2].

However, traditional heart-to-heart talk models are often predominantly problem-oriented, excessively focusing on analyzing the causes of student difficulties and alleviating negative emotions. This approach can easily fall into the trap of "preachy" communication. Not only does it struggle to fully stimulate students' subjective initiative, but it may also lead students to avoid revealing their true problems for fear of being criticized, thereby significantly diminishing the effectiveness of the conversations [3]. Meanwhile, some counselors lack systematic theoretical support and scientific methodological guidance in their practice, often relying solely on experience. When faced with students' individualized needs, this can result in low communication efficiency and insufficiently targeted problem-solving, making it difficult to meet the developmental requirements of student affairs work in the new era.

In this context, introducing mature psychological theories and methods to optimize the heart-to-heart talk model has become an important exploratory direction for enhancing the efficacy of counselors' work. The solution-focused approach (SFA), a psychological intervention model originating in the field of family therapy in the 1980s, is grounded in core principles such as "solution-orientation," "student agency," and "accumulating small changes." It emphasizes de-emphasizing the problem itself and instead focusing on the individual's existing resources and successful experiences, guiding individuals to autonomously construct solutions through empowerment-oriented questioning. Its core philosophy highly aligns with the student-centered working principle of university counselors' heart-to-heart talks [4].

From a theoretical perspective, introducing SFA into the realm of counselors' heart-to-heart talks can break down the disciplinary barriers between traditional ideological and political education and psychological theory, promoting interdisciplinary integration and enriching the theoretical system of university student affairs. It provides a new theoretical perspective and research paradigm for heart-to-heart talks. From a practical standpoint, this model, through its standardized processes and operable techniques, can offer counselors specific methodological guidance, helping them move beyond reliance on empiricism. It effectively stimulates students' internal motivation, facilitating a shift from "counselor-led problem-solving" to "student-autonomous problem-solving," thereby enhancing the practical outcomes of these conversations.

Meanwhile, although existing research generally acknowledges the importance of heart-to-heart talks in university student affairs, and some scholars have attempted to introduce theories like positive psychology and humanism into conversational practice [5,6], systematic research on the application of SFA in counselors' heart-to-heart talks remains relatively scarce. Most studies remain at the level of theoretical introduction, lacking analysis of the model's adaptability to specific talk scenarios and the construction of implementable practical frameworks.

2. Core connotation and theoretical foundation of the solution-focused approach

The solution-focused approach originated from Brief Family Therapy in the 1980s. Its core connotation lies in breaking through the traditional "problem-oriented" intervention logic, focusing instead on "constructing solutions," and emphasizing the path to problem-solving from within the individual's own resources and

experiences [7]. This model does not deliberately trace the causes of problems but concentrates on the abilities the individual already possesses, past successful experiences, and positive expectations for the future. It posits that every individual possesses the potential to solve their own problems, and the key to intervention is to activate this potential through guidance, rather than imposing solutions externally [8].

In the context of university counselors' heart-to-heart talks, this connotation manifests as a shift towards "solution-oriented" thinking. Counselors no longer over-focus on the negative manifestations or causal analysis of the student's problem. Instead, they guide students to think about "how they would like the situation to improve" and "what has helped alleviate the problem in the past." This positive guidance redirects the student's attention from the "problem itself" to the "possibility of solutions." Furthermore, the model highlights the value of "student agency," viewing the student as the "expert" on their own situation. The counselor's role shifts from an "instructor" to a "facilitator." Through equal dialogue and open-ended questions, the counselor encourages students to actively express their needs and explore solutions, rather than passively accepting advice or lectures. This positioning effectively stimulates students' internal motivation and enhances their sense of control over problem-solving. Notably, "accumulating small changes" is a crucial concept in SFA. The model believes that solving complex problems often starts with small, actionable changes [9]. These small changes not only provide quick positive feedback but also gradually break the solidified cycle of the problem, forming a positive cycle of "small change → increased confidence → more change." This concept is particularly suited to the growth characteristics of university students, avoiding the reluctance to act due to overly ambitious goals and allowing students to build confidence and ability in problem-solving through gradual change.

The key techniques of the SFA are the concrete vehicles for implementing its core concepts. These techniques revolve around the logic of "activating resources, constructing solutions, and reinforcing actions" [10], providing operable methodological support for counselors' heart-to-heart talks.

Relationship-building technique is the foundation of all techniques. Its core goal is to establish a safe and trusting conversation atmosphere. This requires the counselor to adopt an attitude of active listening, empathetic response, and respectful acceptance, making the student feel understood and valued. In the early stages of the conversation, the counselor uses attentive body language, uninterrupted listening, and empathetic statements like "I can sense you're feeling somewhat anxious about the academic pressure right now" to lower the student's defenses and lay the emotional foundation for deeper communication.

Problem clarification and focusing technique aims to prevent the conversation content from becoming scattered and helps students transform vague feelings about a problem into specific, definable goals [11,12]. Counselors can use questions such as "In what specific situations does this problem typically occur?" or "If this problem were improved, what would be different in your life?" to guide students in clarifying the specific manifestations of the problem, its scope of impact, and their own expectations for improvement. This prevents the conversation from descending into generalized complaints and ensures subsequent communication remains centered on core needs.

Empowerment-oriented questioning technique is the core technique of SFA, primarily including miracle questions, scaling questions, and exception questions [9]:

Miracle questions guide students to imagine the "ideal scenario after the problem is solved," e.g., "Suppose a miracle happened overnight while you were asleep, and this problem vanished. What would be the first small sign you noticed tomorrow morning that told you things were different?" This helps students break free from the confines of the current problem and clarify their desired outcomes [13].

Scaling questions help students perceive the possibility of change through quantitative assessment, e.g., "On

a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means no confidence at all and 10 means extremely confident, how would you rate your current confidence in solving this problem? Why did you choose that number?" This allows students to see the confidence base they already have and identify directions for future improvement.

Exception questions focus on the student's past successful experiences, e.g., "Have you encountered a similar situation before in your life? How did you handle it then?" This helps students unearth their own overlooked resources and abilities, making them realize they are not "powerless to solve the problem" but already have relevant experience to draw upon.

Action reinforcement technique focuses on translating solution ideas into concrete actions. The counselor guides the student to break down the solution into small, executable steps [14], e.g., "Based on what we discussed about your past experience, what one small step could you try taking in the next week? How often might you do this?" Simultaneously, the counselor helps the student anticipate potential difficulties in implementing the action and consider coping methods, e.g., "If you run into a scheduling conflict when trying this, how could you adjust?" This ensures the action plan not only has a clear direction but also includes contingency plans, thereby reinforcing the student's willingness and ability to act.

3. Application framework of the solution-focused approach in university counselors' heart-to-heart talks

The core practical value of the SFA lies in its operable process system. Aligning with the characteristics of university counselors' heart-to-heart talks—"fragmented time, diverse needs, and developmental goals"— a closed-loop implementation framework of "pre-session preparation, in-session implementation, and post-session follow-up" can be constructed to translate theoretical concepts into practical actions (**Figure 1**).
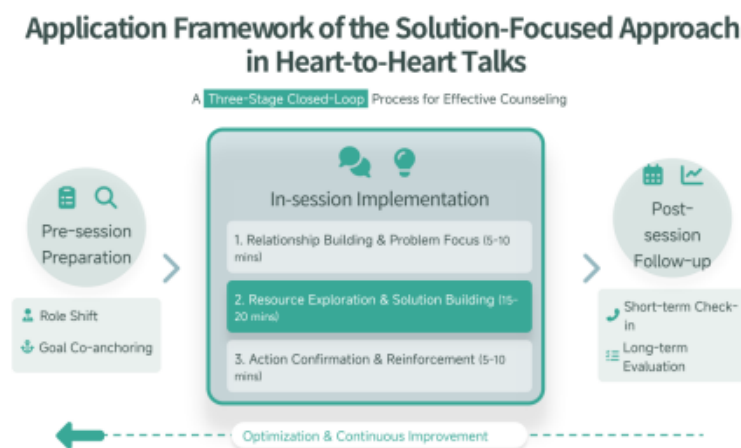
Figure 1. Application framework of the solution-focused approach in heart-to-heart talks

3.1. Pre-session preparation phase: Clarifying goals and role positioning

Pre-session preparation is the foundation for ensuring the effective application of the SFA, centering on the counselor's role transition and the precise anchoring of conversation goals [15]. Counselors must first deepen their understanding of the core logic and key techniques of SFA, particularly breaking away from the traditional habits of "preachy" and "problem-etiology-focused" conversations, and avoid pre-emptive assumptions about the student's issues. Simultaneously, counselors should preliminarily gather basic information about the

student's academic performance, interpersonal relationships, etc., through daily observation, class committee feedback, or brief prior communication. However, this serves only as background context, not for inferring causes, maintaining respect for the student's individual experience. Based on this, the counselor needs to conduct initial communication with the student to jointly define the core goal of the conversation.

3.2. In-session implementation phase: Three-stage guidance and interaction

The implementation phase should adhere to the principle of "gradual progression and student leadership," transitioning from problem focus to solution implementation through three coherent guiding stages, with the total duration controlled within 30–40 minutes (**Figure 2**).

Stage 1: Relationship building and problem focusing (5–10 minutes)

The counselor initiates the conversation with open-ended questions, such as, "What's been on your mind lately that you wanted to talk about?" While the student is speaking, the counselor conveys empathy and acceptance through nodding, repeating key points, and reflecting feelings, helping to establish a safe environment for expression. After the student's initial explanation, the counselor further guides them to specify the problem, for instance, "In what specific situations is this more noticeable?" or "How is this affecting your studies or daily life specifically?" This prevents the problem from remaining at an abstract level like "I feel very anxious" and gradually locks the focus onto concrete, perceptible problem manifestations.

Stage 2: Resource exploration and solution building (15–20 minutes — core phase)

The counselor uses a series of empowerment-oriented questions to activate the student's internal resources. First, exception questions are used to guide the student to recall positive past experiences in similar situations, e.g., "Have you encountered a situation somewhat like this before? How did you handle it then, and what was the outcome?" This helps students discover their existing problem-solving capacities. Next, miracle questions guide the student to envision the ideal state, e.g., "Suppose a miracle happened overnight while you were asleep, and this problem you're worried about was solved. What would be the first small sign you noticed tomorrow morning that told you things were different?" This helps students clarify their desired outcomes through imagination. Then, scaling questions allow the student to quantify the gap between the current state and the desired outcome, e.g., "On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means the problem hasn't improved at all and 10 means it's completely resolved to your satisfaction, where would you say you are now? What number would you like to reach first as a next step?" Based on this, the counselor does not provide solutions directly but uses questions like, "Based on the experience you just mentioned, what do you think you could try doing next?" to guide the student in autonomously exploring solutions suited to their situation. While the student elaborates, the counselor adds details appropriately to ensure the solution's preliminary feasibility.

Stage 3: Action confirmation and reinforcement (5–10 minutes)

This stage focuses on translating the student's explored solutions into concrete, actionable steps. The counselor guides the student to break down the solution into small, short-term operational steps, e.g., "In the next week, which specific action are you planning to try first? Roughly how often, and for how long each time?" Simultaneously, the counselor helps the student anticipate potential difficulties in implementation, e.g., "If you encounter [specific situation] while trying this, how could you adjust?" Furthermore, by affirming the student's thinking and the advantages of their plan—e.g., "The method you proposed fits well with your daily rhythm; it should be easier to stick with"—the counselor reinforces the student's confidence and reduces apprehension about outcomes, ensuring the student concludes the conversation with a clear direction for action.
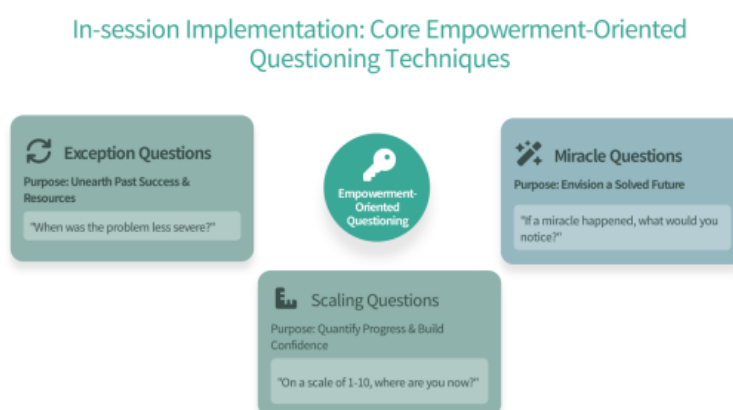
Figure 2. In-session implementation: Core empowerment-oriented questioning techniques

3.3. Post-session follow-up phase: Feedback and effect consolidation

Post-session follow-up is crucial for preventing the conversation from becoming a mere formality and for achieving continuous improvement. It should be conducted based on the SFA concept of "accumulating small changes," spanning short-term and long-term dimensions.

Short-term follow-up typically occurs 3–5 days after the conversation. The counselor can proactively inquire about the student's progress through casual channels like online messages or brief face-to-face meetings, e.g., "Last week we talked about you planning to try [specific method]. Have you had a chance to start? How did it feel?" For any action the student has taken, regardless of the perceived effect, the counselor should affirm the effort itself: "Taking that first step is a significant achievement in itself." If the student hasn't started, avoid immediate criticism; instead, use questions like "Did you run into any obstacles?" to understand the reasons and help adjust the plan.

Long-term follow-up takes place 2–4 weeks after the conversation. At this point, the student's feedback should be used to assess the degree of improvement. If the student reports progress, the counselor can guide them to summarize successful strategies, e.g., "What actions do you feel helped the most during this period? How could you use these experiences if you face a similar situation later?" This helps transform short-term actions into long-term capabilities.

4. Challenges and optimization strategies for applying the solution-focused approach in university counselors' heart-to-heart talks

4.1. Main application challenges

Although the SFA can compensate for the shortcomings of traditional talk models, its practical application in university counselors' heart-to-heart talks still faces multiple challenges. Most counselors lack a professional background in psychology, and their theoretical understanding of SFA often remains superficial, making it difficult to grasp the fundamental differences between "solution-orientation" and "problem etiology." During conversations, they easily fall back into the traditional mindset of "preaching" and "advice-giving." Particularly with key techniques like miracle questions and scaling questions, the lack of practical experience often leads to stiff application, failing to effectively guide students to explore solutions autonomously and reducing the model's application to a mere formality. Meanwhile, some students, accustomed to the passive role of receiving direct solutions from counselors, may have cognitive biases against the SFA concept of "viewing oneself as

the expert in problem-solving." They might respond passively or avoid deep thinking during talks, making it difficult to actively cooperate with the counselor in resource exploration and solution building, thereby weakening the interactivity and effectiveness of the conversation. Furthermore, the current evaluation of talk effectiveness in universities often relies heavily on subjective student feedback questionnaires, lacking quantifiable and trackable indicators. This makes it impossible to accurately measure students' behavioral changes post-talk (e.g., frequency of problem improvement, degree of action implementation) or to assess the long-term impact of SFA on students' problem-coping abilities. Consequently, the effectiveness of talks cannot be scientifically verified, and subsequent optimization of the model lacks data support.

4.2. Optimization strategies

To address the practical challenges in applying SFA, targeted optimization strategies should be constructed from three dimensions: "enhancing practitioner competence," "guiding participant cognition," and "improving the evaluation system," to promote the model's effective implementation.

In terms of counselor capacity building, universities should establish a "structured and practice-oriented" specialized training system. The theoretical phase focuses on the core logic and key techniques of SFA, helping counselors clarify its differences from traditional talk models [3]. The simulation phase sets up typical student problem scenarios (e.g., academic anxiety, interpersonal conflicts) for counselors to practice applying questioning techniques through role-playing. The case supervision phase involves analyzing real conversation cases to help counselors identify application pitfalls and enhance their flexible application skills.

Regarding student cognitive guidance, universities can integrate the basic concepts of SFA into contexts such as freshman orientation and mandatory mental health courses. Through classroom explanations, situational role-plays, and case sharing, the core idea that "students possess their own resources and abilities for problem-solving" can be communicated. This helps break students' psychological dependence on counselors, allows them to understand the interactive nature and their expected participation in heart-to-heart talks in advance, and increases their willingness to actively engage in subsequent conversations.

For constructing the evaluation system, universities should establish a "multi-dimensional and dynamic" effectiveness assessment framework, designing specific indicators across three levels:

Student action dimension: Quantifying actual student change by regularly tracking and recording action implementation post-talk (e.g., weekly action completion rate, frequency of problem recurrence).
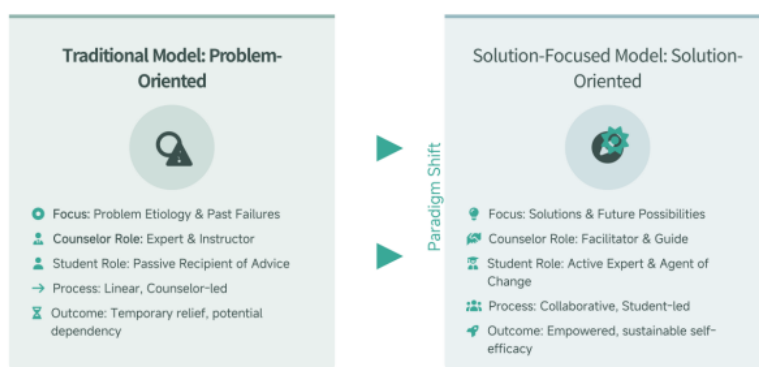
Problem improvement dimension: Measuring the trend of problem improvement using scaling methods (e.g., 1–10 points), where students rate the severity of the problem before the talk, one week after, and one month after.

5. Conclusion

The SFA, with its core logic of "solution-orientation" and value orientation of "strengthening student agency," highly aligns with the current practical needs of university counselors' heart-to-heart talks for "targeted guidance" and "personalized support." It provides a new theoretical perspective and practical pathway for overcoming the limitations of traditional talks, such as "over-focusing on problem etiology" and "passive student participation." The three-stage application framework of "pre-session preparation, in-session implementation, and post-session follow-up" constructed earlier translates the concepts of SFA into an operable workflow by clarifying the roles of counselors and students and detailing the core tasks and technical

points at each stage. This framework not only helps counselors reduce "ineffective communication" and enhance conversation efficiency but also activates students' internal resources and willingness to act through empowerment-oriented questioning. It enables students to strengthen their self-efficacy through the process of autonomously exploring solutions, thereby achieving the dual objectives of ideological and political education guidance and mental health support (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Model comparison: From problem-oriented to solution-focused

It is important to note that the application framework developed in this study is primarily based on general scenarios of university counselors' heart-to-heart talks. Its adaptability and the refinement of technical details for the diverse needs of different student groups (e.g., academically at-risk students, graduates confused about career choices, students with complex interpersonal conflicts) require further exploration. Furthermore, while current evaluations of talk effectiveness often focus on students' subjective feedback and short-term behavioral changes, how to construct a more systematic evaluation indicator system integrated with students' long-term development trajectories (e.g., academic progress, stability of psychological state) is a direction that needs improvement in future research.

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