Evaluation of Narrative Therapy in the Decrease of Female Students' Identity Crisis in the Department of Sciences and Counseling of Islamic Azad University, Roudehen Branch, Roudehen, Iran

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Quantitative Study

Abstract

Background: The present research aimed to investigate the effect of narrative therapy on the decreasing of female students' identity crisis in the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Counseling of Islamic Azad University, Roudehen Branch, Roudehen, Iran.

Methods: The present study was a quasi-experiment with pre-test, post-test, and control group design. The statistical population included all the female students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Counseling of Islamic Azad University, Roudehen Branch, from among which, a sample of 36 students was selected based on the Berzonsky's Identity Styles Inventory (ISI-6G). The subjects were divided into experimental and control groups. The content of the sessions was based on the theory of narrative therapy which was designed by the researcher and administered for 8 sessions of 60 minutes.

Results: The obtained data were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The results indicated that narrative therapy is effective in the decreasing of diffuse-avoidant identity style and increasing of informational style at a 0.05 level of significance.

Conclusion: With regard to the results of the present research, it can be concluded that this method can be of great importance in the treatment of depressed and anxious individuals. Therefore, this treatment, with regard to its flexibility and uniqueness, the techniques that individuals use in structuring their own stories, and the confrontation of the clients with themselves and not their thoughts, may be of greater importance in the future.

Keywords: Narrative therapy, Identity, Identity processing styles, Identity crisis

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Introduction

Adolescence is a high-risk period of life and adolescents are regarded as vulnerable strata of the society who need kindness, guidance, support, and counseling of their parents.

According to Piaget, during the earlier stages of development, the individual's tangible behaviors and non-abstract thoughts are associated with the here and now; however, as the individual grows, s/he moves toward a theoretical ground and seeks to know who s/he is and who s/he will become (C. Crane, translated by Fadayi, 2009). Adolescence is a period of life during which the individual tries to establish an identity with high levels of sensitivity to the feedback of the environment and personal responsibility and find a reliable point to associate with self, other gender and sociocultural values of the environment (Shfrz, B, translated by Rasekh, 2004). The identity theory of Berzonsky emphasizes the cognitive perspective in the development of identity. According to Berzonsky (1990), identity is constructed and forged in continuous interaction with the physical and social world. Berzonsky names 3 distinct types of orientations as identity styles by which self-related information is reviewed, constructed, and used. Informational style tends to investigate different solutions and options to an issue prior to making commitment to one of them. Normative style considers growth as identifying with family and social expectations and presents a plethora of evidence of commitment to the expectations of people in authority. Diffuse-avoidant style tends to postpone commitment and decision-making based on forthcoming events (Berzonsky, 1993). How can we help adolescents to effectively and positively pass childhood and enter adulthood? This is a question posed to parents, trainers, researchers, and politicians. From a narrative approach, adolescence is a period of life in which adolescents are able to propose hypotheses, ideals, and images for the past, present, and future. This cognitive growth enables them to cope with problems using new perspectives (Hacker, 1994). We change, when our stories change. This perspective claims that we should not refer to the theories of others and it is enough to only refer to the next season of

your own story if you want to know your identity and who you are. Narrative therapists encourage us to rely on the stories instead of the theories related to personality and psychological pathologies. Narrative therapists can help us understand who we are, who we have been, and who we can be. Narrative therapists, like literature critics, can help us invent new meanings and innovative interpretations (Prochaska and Norcross, translated by Seyyed Mohammadi, 2004). Sometimes, the adolescent cannot develop an integrative identity, find a job, or enter society. This is what Ericson calls role confusion (Ahadi and Mohseni, 2002). The process of the development of identity (Ericson, 1968), and narrative identity in particular, works with a method by which the adolescents predict and explain their past, present, and future. In this perspective, the growth of identity is not limited to adolescence, but related to all stages of life from childhood to adulthood (Mclean & Pasupathi, 2010). During adolescence, individuals' cognitive capacity grows and this enables them to seriously think about the past and the future, possibilities and impossibilities of life, their thoughts and other people's perception of them (Santrock, 2001; Hacker, 1994; Cotton, 1994).

Identity crisis denotes tension, conflict, or exclusion from a balanced state and deviation from the truth. Therefore, identity crisis occurs when some factors result in tension and maladjustment with self and other social groups. The most basic critical factors of identity take their roots from the conflict between psychological and cultural concepts, personal and group identity, political definition of the society, dominating values and standards, and conflicts with mental identities and other identities. The problem of identity emerges in different forms in different societies and has turned into a serious concern in the realm of politics. According to Binder, identity crisis is not necessarily the problem of a country, but the crisis of our era (Payne & Manning, 1992).

Today, the most important causative factor of this tension is global communications and the process of globalization that have led to interaction among cultures and a movement toward boundless globalization using innovative communication technologies (Ruiz, Fofonoff, Hines, VonHolle, McCann, Carlton, 1997).

Ericson has carried out a comprehensive research in the realm of identity crisis. He asserts that, while faced with identity crisis, the adolescent is confronted with intense inability, doubt in decision-making, feelings of isolation and emptiness, increasing inability to communicate with others, sexual function disorder, negative self-image, time disorientation, and time urgency (Ericson, 1968). According to Ericson, most young individuals used to start to accept occupational responsibilities and adulthood-related commitments when they came of age. However, by the end of the 20th century, the social changes that occurred in the United States of America and other Western counties prolonged the period of transference to adulthood (Cote, 2000). This transference period is simultaneous with the academic period at university. This period is called the emergence of adulthood by Arendt (1977). The expansion of the experience at universities allows the individuals to postpone work, marriage, parental roles, and other adulthood-related responsibilities, and therefore, the assignment of establishing and developing an integrated identity continues until the beginning of adulthood (Cote, J.E., 2000). There are different approaches to decreasing identity crisis, of which, narrative therapy can be mentioned.

According to Mclean and Pasupathi (2010), narrative approach is the best possible method to answer questions about the development of identity. Adams (1999) asserts that we construct a number of stories that establish our identity and we construct these stories as we live them. When a person retells his/her story, unity and relationship is observed between its different aspects and sections, and so, we can understand, the extent to which s/he has developed an integrated identity. The important point in this description is continuance and cohesion in time. Continuance and cohesion in time means feelings of cohesiveness during the story of life. With the increase in age, the transference from one place to another and the experience of different jobs and activities, the person still feels himself or herself as the first person. According to Ricoeur, time cohesion and the unity of the specific person during time are associated with his/her identity. In this question, the future is brought to light as much as the past.

The theory of narrative therapy is one of the approaches designed and developed by the experts in different social, economic, and cultural conditions dominating our societies. Therefore, it should be tested in different studies in order to approve its efficacy. Whether this approach can be used to decrease students' identity crisis is a controversial topic among scholars and experts of psychology and counseling

Methods

The main goal: Determining the effectiveness of narrative therapy in decreasing students' identity crisis

Alternative goals

• Determining the effectiveness of narrative therapy in informational identity styles

• Determining the effectiveness of narrative therapy in informational normative styles

• Determining the effectiveness of narrative therapy in diffuse-avoidant identity styles

Research hypotheses

• Main hypothesis: Narrative therapy will be effective in the decreasing of students' identity crisis.

Alternative hypotheses

• Narrative therapy will be effective on informational identity style.

• Narrative therapy will be effective on normative identity style.

• Narrative therapy will be effective on the diffuse-avoidant identity style.

The statistical population included all the female students who scored high on identity crisis in the School of Educational Sciences and Counseling of Islamic Azad University, Roudehen Branch, Iran, during the 2013-2014 academic years. The present research aims to investigate the effectiveness of narrative therapy in decreasing identity crisis among the female students of the School of Educational Sciences and Counseling. Based on the content and goal of this research that required data gathering and relationship analysis, the present research employs a semi-experimental method with pre-test and post-test design. All the moral and ethical issue of the research were considered in all stages of the study including obtaining written consent from the students to undergo the research, congruence of the research with cultural and religious beliefs of the subjects, lack of knowledge of the control group about the training, honesty, and confidentiality.

The Identity Styles Inventory (ISI-6G) was first designed and developed by Berzonsky (1990) to measure cognitive-social processes used by adolescents to cope with identity-related issues. Based on the perspective of Berzonsky, adolescents choose 3 different processing identity styles. This 40-item questionnaire evaluates 3 identity styles including informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant styles. The answers are scored on a 5-point Likert scale from completely agree to completely disagree. The items of 9, 11, 14, and 20 are reversely scored. This questionnaire includes 11 items for informational style (2, 30, 26, 25, 18, 16, 6, 5, 37, 33, 35), 9 items for normative identity style (4, 10, 19, 21, 23,, 23, 28, 32, 34, 40), 10 items for diffuse-avoidant identity style (3, 8, 13, 17, 24, 27, 29, 31, 36, 38), and 10 items for commitment (1, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 20, 22, 39). Berzonsky (1990) has reported the Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire for informational, normative, diffuse-avoidant, and

commitment styles to be equal to 0.71, 0.65, 0.75 and 0.78, respectively. Moreover, the reliability coefficient using test-retest after a 2 month-interval was reported to be between 0.71 and 0.75. This questionnaire was used to evaluate identity crisis of female students of the School of Educational Science and Counseling both prior to and subsequent to narrative therapy sessions.

In order to administer this research, the research plan of narrative therapy sessions for decreasing identity crisis was publicly announced in the School of Educational Sciences and Counseling. The ISI-6G was administered and 36 individuals who had obtained a score of above 19 were randomly selected and assigned to experimental and control groups. The experimental group underwent 8 weekly sessions of narrative therapy lasting 60 minutes while the control group did not receive any training. Both groups were evaluated using ISI-6G prior to and subsequent to the training.

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in this research. Frequency, percentile frequency, mean, and standard deviations were used to describe the data. Moreover, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to determine between-group differences.

Results
Descriptive indices
In total 36 subjects participated in the present study, 18 subjects in each group.

As observed in table 1, 11.11% (4 subjects) of the respondents were under the age of 20, 72.22% (26 subjects) were between 20 and 24 years old and 16.67% (6 subjects) were over 24 years old.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of age in the study subjects

Age (Year)	Frequency (%)
< 20	4 (11.11)
20-24	26 (72.22)
> 24	6 (16.67)
Total	36 (100)

As observed in tables 2 and 3, the comparison of the mean scores of post-test and pre-test in the experimental and control groups indicate that the mean scores of post-test have increased in the informational style; however, they have decreased in the normative and diffuse-avoidant styles.

In order to test the hypothesis that narrative therapy will be effective in decreasing students' identity crisis, ANCOVA was employed on the subscales of identity and its changes in the experimental group as compared to the control group. We concluded that, narrative therapy has been effective in decreasing identity crisis among the female students of the School of Educational Sciences and Counseling.

Second hypothesis: Group narrative therapy training will be effective on informational identity style of female students of the School of Educational Sciences and Counseling.

Levene's assumption which was used to investigate the variance equality of the dependent variable among different groups (experimental and control groups) indicated that the variance of the dependent variable is homogenous between these groups (f = 0.276, df_1 = 1, df_2 = 34, P = 0.603). Therefore, ANCOVA can be employed.

With regard to the data presented in table 4, (f = 176.286, α = 0.05), the null hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is confirmed (95%). Consequently, we can conclude that narrative therapy is effective on the informational orientation of students. The Etta value indicates that 83.8% of the changes in

informational orientation of students resulted from group narrative therapy.

Second hypothesis: Group narrative therapy training will be effective on normative identity style in female students of the School of Educational Sciences and Counseling.

Levene's assumption which was used to investigate the variance equality of the dependent variable among different groups (experimental and control groups) indicates that the variance of the dependent variable is homogenous between these groups (f = 0.182, df_1 = 1, df_2 = 34, P = 0.672). Therefore, ANCOVA can be employed.

With regard to the data presented in table 5, (f = 10.13.136, α = 0.05), the null hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is confirmed (95%). Therefore, we can conclude that narrative therapy is effective on normative orientation in students. The Etta value indicates that 62.6% of the changes in normative orientation of students resulted from group narrative therapy.

Third hypothesis: Group narrative therapy training will be effective on diffuse-avoidant identity style in female students of the School of Educational Sciences and Counseling.

Levene's assumption which was used to investigate the variance equality of the dependent variable among different groups (experimental and control groups) indicates that the variance of dependent variable is equal between these groups (f = 0.142, df_1 = 1, df_2 = 34, P = 0.708). Therefore, ANCOVA can be employed.

Table 2. Descriptive indices of the studied variables in the pre-test (experimental and control groups)

Group	Mean ± SD	Max	Min	Mean ± SD	Max	Min
Informational orientation	27.27 ± 3.76	33	19	27.38 ± 4.18	33	21
Normative orientation	37.44 ± 4.38	43	27	37.88 ± 3.92	28	43
Diffuse-avoidant orientation	41.94 ± 3.58	48	35	42.11 ± 4.01	48	35

SD: Standard deviation

Table 3. Descriptive indices of the studied variables in the post-test (experimental and control groups)

Group	Mean ± SD	Max	Min	Mean ± SD	Max	Min
Informational orientation	45.22 ± 3.76	52	38	27.77 ± 4.10	35	21
Normative orientation	27.33 ± 4.52	34	17	37.94 ± 3.88	43	29
Diffuse-avoidant orientation	32.22 ± 3.73	38	25	41.94 ± 3.90	49	36

SD: Standard deviation

Table 4. The results of covariance analysis for the first hypothesis

Source of change	SS	df	MS	F	P	Etta coefficient
Covariate's effect	47961.000	1	47961.000	3087.098	< 0.001	0.989
Group (experimental/group)	2738.778	1	2738.778	176.286	< 0.001	0.838
Error	222.528	34	15.536			
Total	50922.306	36				

SS: Total sum of squares; MS: Mean square; df: Degrees of freedom

Table 5. The results of covariance analysis for the second hypothesis

Dependent variable of post-test (normative)						
Source of change	SS	df	MS	F	P	Etta coefficient
Covariate's effect	38350.694	1	38350.694	2155.444	< 0.001	0.984
Group (experimental/group)	1013.362	1	1013.361	56.954	< 0.001	0.626
Error	604.944	34	17.792			
Total	39969.000	36				

SS: Total sum of squares; MS: Mean square; df: Degrees of freedom

Table 6. The results of covariance analysis for the third hypothesis

Dependent variable of posttest (diffuse-avoidant)						
Source of change	SS	df	MS	F	P	Etta coefficient
Covariate's effect	49729.000	1	49729.000	3233.547	< 0.001	0.990
Group (experimental/group)	880.111	1	880.111	57.228	< 0.001	0.627
Error	522.889	34	15.379			
Total	51132.000	36				

SS: Total sum of squares; MS: Mean square; df: Degrees of freedom

With regard to the data presented in table 6, (f = 880.111, α = 0.05), the null hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is confirmed (95%). Therefore, we can conclude that narrative therapy is effective on diffuse-avoidant orientation in students. The Etta value indicates that 62.7% of the changes in diffuse-avoidant orientation of students resulted from group narrative therapy.

Discussion

The experimental and control groups had similar pre-test scores; however, significant differences were observed between the groups. The results indicated the effectiveness of narrative therapy in decreasing students' identity crisis. Therefore, as expected, the employment of group narrative therapy had effect on the students' identity style scores. A body of research in personality psychology (McAdams, 2001; Singer, 2004)indicates that, identity takes the form of an integrated narrative or life story in adulthood that integrates the past

interpretations with present self and gives meaning and purpose to life (Pals, 2006). Narration is the main process by which the identity grows and it is the behavior that indicates the present status of an individual's identity (Kroger, 2003; Nelson, 2003; Mclean & Pratt, 2006; Mclean & Pasupathi, 2010; McAdams, 1995) In fact, narration can be the best explanation to the questions "Where have we come from?" and "Where are we going to?", and the relationship between these two. It means that, individuals achieve a perception of the role of the past in shaping who they are now and the future orientation of past and present through the process of narrating their experience Different articles on identity styles have reported that these styles can be separated by two fundamental aspects (Soenens B., Duriez. B. & Goossens L., 2005). According to Berzonsky (1990), these aspects can have names such as "superficial information process and identity-related issues" and "maintaining marinating and supporting traditional beliefs versus broad-

mindedness and democracy". The first aspect distinguishes the two informational and diffuse-avoidant styles and the second aspect separates the two informational and normative styles. With regard to the first aspect, Berzonsky and Ferrari, J.R. (1996) realized that groups with informational style show higher levels of cognitive complexity and select regular and conscious processing styles in their decision-making. However, individuals with diffuse-avoidant style have lower levels of cognitive complexity, are afraid of confronting events and postpone them.

With regard to the second aspect, studies indicate that individuals with informational identity style have higher levels of openness to receiving self-related information and personal identity (Schwartz et al., 2004). Adolescents with informational identity style move appropriately toward self-exploration and getting to know their important characteristics in Ericson's stage of achieving identity. This style is associated with 1) high self-thinking and active information process and 2) openness for receiving new information (Soenens B., Duriez. B. & Goossens L., 2005). Diffuse-avoidant identity style is the result of an disintegrated and separated identity structure (Soenens B., Duriez. B. & Goossens L., 2005). As previously mentioned, the establishment of personality is related to the cohesion and level of insight in life stories (Mclean & Pratt, 2006). It seems the administration of the narrative therapy protocol in 8 group sessions for the students has caused a significant differences between the two groups. The research results showed that what we make of our life establishes the foundation of our identity and we live in line with our constructed stories. In this viewpoint, identity is an integrity and the individual unites his/her specific experience throughout his/her life. When a person retells his/her story, the unity and relationship is observed between its different aspects and sections and so, we can understand, the extent to which s/he has developed an integrated identity. The important point in this description is the continuance and cohesion in time. Continuance and cohesion in time means feelings of cohesiveness during the story of life. With the increase in age, the transference from one place to another and the experience of different jobs and activities, the person still feels himself or herself as the first person.

Based on the results of the present research and the effectiveness of narrative therapy in the decrease of identity crisis, it is recommended that authorities of universities and other institutes plan and deliver appropriate educational services to decrease identity crisis to establish successful identities. Moreover, this method can be used as an effective complimentary method in combination with other methods. With regard to the results of the present research, it can be concluded that, this method can be of great importance in the treatment of depressed and anxious individuals. Therefore, a bright future is waiting for this treatment and individuals welcome this treatment more than other treatments with regard to its flexibility and uniqueness and the techniques that individuals use in structuring their own stories, and the confrontation of the clients with themselves and not their thoughts.

Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.

Acknowledgments

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