

2. EFFECTS OF NARRATIVE THERAPY ON SELF-COMPASSION, LOCUS OF CONTROL AND RESILIENCE IN ART STUDENTS

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Abstract: *A growing body of research has shown the multiple benefits narrative therapy has on personal development and overcoming adversities. With social change increasingly becoming part of mainstream psychological practice, narrative therapy offers an innovative and inclusive model for honoring the lived experience of clients. In July 11-12 and September 18, 2024, within the ICMA UNAGE ArtReal grant: “Interdisciplinary radiographies between performance art and narrative psychology”, a series of workshops took place. During these workshops, a narrative specialist applied the Tree of Life technique on 33 students of “George Enescu” National University of Arts in Iași, from the Faculty of Theatre, the Faculty of Music Performance, Composition and Theoretical Music Studies and the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design. The subjects completed three questionnaires focused on locus of control, self-compassion and psychological resilience, before and after the workshops. We considered the three variables relevant to their artistic identity, as their feedback provided the subjects with the opportunity to complete their own story as actors, musicians or visual artists. Through comparative statistical analysis, we discovered significant differences in resilience, locus of control and self-compassion levels before and after the workshops. Although the small group of participants makes it difficult to generalize the results, these findings create new implications regarding the value of narrative therapy for the construction of identity.*

Key words: *narrative therapy, tree of life technique, self-compassion, locus of control, resilience*

1. Introduction

Narrative therapy is an increasingly used therapeutic modality, as its benefits have shown a variety of implications (Madigan 2011; Etchison & Kleist, 2000; Carlson, 1997; Ghavibazou et al, 2022; Wallis et al, 2010; Shakeri et al, 2020). Narrative therapy refers to a range of social constructionist and constructivist approaches to the process of therapeutic change. Change occurs by exploring how the client uses language to define and explain problems. Interpretation of one’s experience in the world serves as the essence of narrative approach to therapy (Etchison & Kleist, 2000). The narrative therapist believes there is no one objective truth, but rather multiple “truths” that provide other possible interpretations for client problems and solutions (Madigan, 2011).

Researchers (McAdams & Janis, 2004; Combs & Freedman 2016; Conti et al, 2024) have also established an important relationship between narrative therapy and identity construction. McAdams's model of narrative identity, which argues that ego identity takes the form of an inner story, appears to resonate with and connect to the narrative therapy movement in many ways. In addition, relational view of

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identity leads to therapeutic responses that give value to interconnection across multiple contexts and that focus on becoming rather than on being (Combs & Freedman, 2016).

The present study aims to investigate the amount to which narrative therapy can influence resilience, locus of control and self-compassion of students majoring in performing and visual arts, as the three concepts may be linked to a clearer image of their artistic identity. Our hypothesis is that the tree of life technique gives them the opportunity to see themselves in a more positive way. This may increase their internal locus of control (by realizing their contribution in their own success), their level of self-compassion (by accepting their weaknesses) and their psychological resilience (by appreciating more the way they endured and overcame problems and adversities).

2. Locus of control

Locus of control (Dafinoiu & Boncu, 2014; Findly & Cooper, 1983; Cobb-Clark, 2015) is a psychological term that refers to how a person perceives the source of control over the events in their life. The American psychologist Julian Rotter has developed the concept within the framework of social learning theory, starting from experiments focused on conditioning and the attribution of rewards, with the aim of trying to explain how reinforcements change people's expectations. Locus of control explains how individuals respond to success and failure, influencing motivation, level of responsibility and behavior in the face of tasks.

People with an internal locus of control believe that the results of their lives are largely determined by their own actions, decisions and efforts. People describe them by being vigilant, organized, and focused on specific goals, prone to initiative in their profession and in their relationships with others. They have difficulty letting others take care of them. They believe that they determine their own success, but also their own failures. They have a high level of personal responsibility and a sense of self-efficacy. They take pride in achieving good results and feel strongly ashamed when results are not satisfactory. An internal locus of control can lead to anxiety and depression, in the case of very high scores.

People with an external locus of control believe that the outcomes of their lives are mainly influenced by factors outside of their control, such as luck, fate, other people, or external circumstances. They tend to believe that they have little control over what happens to them, taking a more passive attitude toward life. They have a less intense reaction to failure, attributing it to factors unrelated to their own performance. They place great trust in superstitions and luck, and frequently consult their horoscopes. They turn to religion to overcome obstacles.

3. Psychological resilience

Resilience (Konner, 2007; Martin-Breen & Anderies, 2011; Wu et al, 2013) is the process that describes positive adaptation to adversity, the ability to build a satisfying life despite adversity. People with this capacity manage, when confronted with a traumatic or difficult event, to capitalize on the negative experience by considering it a catalyst for positive change, reconsidering their priorities, changing their philosophy of life and rediscovering their personal strength and the value of

relationships with those around them. Resilience is not an innate trait, but an ability that can be trained, by learning patterns of thinking and behavior that help the individual seek sources of support for adaptation. Communities of color, poor people and women are more likely to experience adverse life circumstances and therefore develop higher levels of resilience.

Factors that influence the level of individual resilience relate to life context: the attention received in the first years of life, the quality of the parent-child relationship, the mother's level of education, the absence of mental health problems in the parents, social support, belonging to a group, the existence of certain goods and services necessary to achieve goals.

Resilience has also been associated with personal dimensions such as the ability to create realistic plans, high self-esteem, self-control of impulses, the ability to manage strong emotions, coping strategies, communication and problem-solving skills, learned optimism, self-efficacy, confidence, positive illusions, flexibility. People who score high on the resilience questionnaire are able to adapt to change and cope with difficult things that arise unexpectedly. They have the ability to reduce stress and not be discouraged by failure. They can stay focused and think clearly in conditions of chaos or uncertainty. They also have the ability to manage negative emotions such as anger, pain, or sadness.

4. Self-Compassion

Self-compassion (Neff, 2011; Neff, 2023; Allen & Leary, 2010) is the ability to be gentle with ourselves, to relate to ourselves with kindness, to accept ourselves completely, with achievements and failures, qualities and flaws. If self-esteem focuses mainly on acquisitions and successes, self-compassion targets people's attitude in the face of failure. The American researcher Kristin Neff operationalized self-compassion into three components: kindness towards oneself, humanity and mindfulness. The three components are as follows:

1. Self-Kindness vs. Self-Criticism – Being kind to yourself means that when you are suffering, a failure, or feel inadequate, you treat yourself the way you would treat a friend: with encouragement, understanding, empathy, patience. If you think about how you talk to yourself on a day when things are going badly and you are not happy with yourself, you may notice that sometimes you say nasty, harsh things to yourself that you would not say to other people if they were in your situation.

People who practice self-compassion recognize that they are imperfect, that they sometimes fail, and that the difficulties that arise in life are inevitable, so they tend to be gentle with themselves when they face painful experiences, rather than getting angry when life does not go their way. People cannot always be exactly the way they want it to be and they cannot always get exactly what they want. When one denies this reality, suffering increases in the form of stress, frustration, and self-criticism. When one accepts this reality with kindness and understanding, they can easily achieve emotional balance.

2. Humanity vs. Isolation – The frustration that arises when things are not exactly, as we want them to be is often accompanied by a strong sense of isolation – as if “I” am the only person who is suffering or making mistakes. All people suffer. The word “human” implies that humans are mortal, vulnerable and imperfect. Therefore,

self-compassion involves recognizing that personal suffering and imperfection are part of the common human experience – something we all experience, rather than something that happens only to me.

3. Mindfulness vs. Over-identification – Sometimes we are not aware of our suffering, especially when it comes from self-criticism because we identify with that part of us that says “You should have known this, you should have done better, you are not good enough!” Being mindful means observing our negative thoughts and emotions with openness and clarity, so that they are aware of them.

Mindfulness is a receptive mental state, in which we do not make value judgments, but observe thoughts and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress them, deny them or identify with them. People with high levels of self-compassion experience more intense psychological well-being, because they experience less depression and anxiety, have greater life satisfaction, have increased resilience in the face of challenges, have a superior capacity for emotional regulation and maintain healthier interpersonal relationships.

5. Procedure and instruments

In July and September 2024, as part of *ArtReal* grant financed through ICMA sources, a narrative specialist conducted a series of workshops that included applying the tree of life technique on 33 art students. Before and after these workshops they completed three questionnaires that measured self-compassion, locus of control and resilience. Julian Rotter developed several versions of the locus of control identification questionnaire. Researchers who adapted the factors and items to different age categories continued his efforts. The scale we applied is a simplified version that includes 13 dichotomous items, with subjects being invited to tick the answer a) or b), depending on which of the two characterizes them more. For odd-numbered items, the internal answer is the first, i.e. a). For even-numbered items, the internal answer is b). Scoring involves awarding 1 point for each internal answer. A subject's score varies between a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 13.

The CR-RISC scale developed by Kathryn Conner and Jonathan Davidson is the most frequently used psychological instrument for assessing resilience. The more extensive version of the scale, the one with 25 items associated with a 5-point Likert scale (numerically scored from 0 to 4), often obtained a Cronbach's alpha index of 0.94, thus demonstrating excellent internal consistency. Being applied to several social categories, the 25 items were grouped into 2, 4 or 5 factors, depending on the research results. In the initial vision of the American psychologists, the items operationalized five factors: 1. tenacity and competence; 2. trust in one's own instinct and the ability to tolerate negative emotions; 3. acceptance of change and securing through relationships; 4. control; 5. spirituality. The calibration of the scale is still an active process. The average score for the American population is 80.7, with a subject's score ranging from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 100.

The Self-Compassion Scale, Short Form (SCS-SF) is a validated version of the original questionnaire created by Kristin Neff. It includes 12 questions and was developed in 2011 by Raes, Pommier, Neff and Van Gucht who obtained an excellent internal consistency of 0.97. The Kindness factor includes items 2 and 6, as well as 11 and 12 (reversed items related to Self-Criticism). The Humanity factor

includes items 5 and 10, as well as 4 and 8 (reversed items related to Isolation). The Mindfulness factor includes items 3 and 7, as well as 1 and 9 (reversed items related to Over-identification). In applying the questionnaire, subjects are invited to respond on a 5-point Likert scale (scored from 1 to 5), indicating how they behave with themselves in difficult moments.

6. Results and discussions

In the case of the group included in the *ArtReal* grant, we found a predominance of internal and extreme internal locus of control, suggesting an orientation focused on a particularly high level of self-responsibility in terms of subjects in the artistic area. They are aware that only through their own strength can they build their path in life and rely very little on external factors or chance. In the questionnaire we applied, the average resilience score among the artist students was 70.24, indicating high capacities for adapting to life's difficulties. This score increased even more after the psychotherapeutic interventions in the workshop. Applying the questionnaire to our students identified a moderate to high level of self-compassion in the group of subjects, which indicates that the artistic area brings young students quite close to their own self. Especially in the acting space, a positive attitude towards oneself could be the condition for maintaining oneself in this profession full of personal and social challenges.

7. Conclusions

Repeated measurements have revealed increased scores in locus of control, resilience, and self-compassion in most of our subjects present at the pre- and post-workshop evaluations. These findings indicate a great potential of the tree of life technique in optimizing scores on the three variables, which justifies the continuation of a quantitative research conducted meticulously and controlled on a large batch of subjects.

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