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Group psychodynamic counselling with final-year undergraduates in clinical psychology: A clinical methodology to reinforce academic identity and psychological well-being

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Educational institutions should ensure that students develop a professional identity, as well as safeguarding their well-being and activating awareness and change processes. The aim of this study was to assess the efficacy of group psychodynamic counselling as a means of reinforcing academic identity – considered the forerunner of professional identity – and psychological well-being in a group of final-year undergraduates studying clinical psychology. Thirty-three final-year-students of clinical psychology who participated in six group psychodynamic counselling sessions were compared with sixteen final-year students of clinical psychology who had never participated in an intervention of this kind. The results suggested that group psychodynamic counselling made students feel more capable of managing their lives and more open to new experiences as well as encouraging them to perceive their relationships as more positive and satisfying, to believe that their life is meaningful, and to achieve greater self-acceptance. The in-depth exploration also prompted students to consider their commitment to their choice of career. Group psychodynamic counselling also reinforced students' educational choice, as the likelihood of students becoming less committed to this choice was reduced after the intervention. Thus, the study confirmed the efficacy of group psychodynamic counselling as a means of reinforcing both academic identity and promoting well-being and demonstrated that it is a tool clinical psychologists and university teachers could use to activate self-reflection and change within educational settings.

Keywords: group psychodynamic counselling; clinical psychology; learning from experience; academic identity; well-being; final-year undergraduates

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Introduction

Bruss and Kopala (1993) analysed professional identity in psychology trainees using Winnicott's (1965) theoretical perspective. They argued that training institutions can be viewed as holding environments with a responsibility to promote healthy development. Educational institutions, such as universities, must therefore promote the development of professional identity as well as ensuring the well-being of their students (Walker & McLean, 2013). Like all educational institutions, universities should create opportunities for reflection on one's academic identity, as this is the forerunner of professional identity, and thus seek to activate awareness and change processes. Group formats for reflection undoubtedly have the potential to promote fruitful exchange between participants, thanks to the mirroring and resonance processes that groups can activate (e.g. Bion, 1961; Foulkes, 1964, 1975; Kaës, 1976; Pines, 1983). Furthermore, it is essential that reflection on one's academic and professional identity is an emotional as well as cognitive process. In the terms used in Bion's (1962) theoretical framework, it is necessary for students to have the opportunity to *learn from experience*, or rather to live the experience and rework it subjectively, actively integrating the new concepts into their own identity, in a continuous cycle of action, research and reflection. Group psychodynamic counselling is potentially one of the best methods of achieving these educational objectives.

This paper presents data from a group psychodynamic counselling intervention used in a group of final-year undergraduates studying clinical psychology at an Italian university. The aim of the study was to assess whether group psychodynamic counselling would reinforce students' academic identity and promote psychological well-being. We think that the medieval workshop in which the transmission of knowledge took place within the relationship between teachers and young apprentices is a good metaphor for this kind of intervention. In the following paragraphs we describe the theory and technique for using group psychodynamic counselling with final-year undergraduates and then provide a brief theoretical overview of research on the professional and academic identity of psychology students.

Group psychodynamic counselling in university settings

The *British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy* has stated that the aim of counselling based in a psychodynamic approach is to enable clients to navigate developmental impasses, to increase self-knowledge, to work through feelings related to personal conflicts, and to improve interpersonal relationships. Psychodynamic counselling can be useful for individuals who, although they do not present specific psychopathological problems, are dealing with conflict related to the developmental stage they are going through and can be based on several different psychoanalytical frameworks. In this work we use the theoretical model proposed by psychotherapists working at the Tavistock

Clinic in London (Copley, 1976; Polacco Williams, 1990; Salzberger Wittenberg, 1986), which is based principally on Bion's work within institutions (e.g. Bion, 1961). Most scientific work in this field is based on the use of individual psychodynamic counselling (e.g. Adamo, 1999; Davanloo, 1978; Richards, 1999; Spurling, 2009) and has shown that psychodynamic counselling is particularly suitable for young adults, because it does not incentivise regression and dependence at a developmental stage in which the focus is on achieving independence (e.g. Adamo, Sarno, Preti, Fontana, & Prunas, 2010; Hetherington, 1999; Noonan, 1983; Scandurra, 2016; Valerio & Adamo, 1995). The particular suitability of psychodynamic counselling for emerging adulthood as a developmental stage is one of the main reasons some researchers and counsellors have chosen to use this type of intervention with university students (e.g. Adamo, 1999; Copley, 1976; Richards, 1999; Spurling, 2009). Richards (1999) noted that the general characteristics of brief psychodynamic counselling are the short duration, the increased activity of the counsellor, and the use of a focus for the work. The main objective of psychodynamic counselling is to help clients to acquire greater insight into their current emotional problems by encouraging them to reflect on their defences. Group psychodynamic counselling differs somewhat from individual psychodynamic counselling for reasons related to the use of the group as a work tool. Group psychodynamic counselling is a brief intervention which is delivered in a group format through a pre-determined, limited number of sessions (from four to six) and is aimed at providing participants with opportunities to understand a given situation more clearly, so that they can face problems related to that situation and make choices and changes accordingly (Amodeo, Liccardo, Tortono, & Valerio, 2008). Each session is conducted by a counsellor supported by a silent observer who acts as a catalyst for persecutory anxieties (Chiodi, Di Fratta, & Valerio, 2009) and as a container for the group's frustrations. The counsellor provides participants with a working focus based on the objectives of the specific experience and participates directly in the discussion, facilitating the functioning of the group and paying specific attention to the group dynamics. The counsellor employs classical psychodynamic tools, such as transference, counter-transference, and projective identifications, in order to access the unconscious emotional climate of the group. Participants' communications are considered reactions to the working focus and, thus, group connections are constantly encouraged in this direction. The ways that the group reacts to the working focus are considered as clues of the *group mentality*, that is of the group mental activity constituted by common desires, needs, and opinions, derived from the unconscious contribution of each participant (Bion, 1961). Reactions of the group to the working focus allow us to understand if the group functions mainly as a work group or a basic assumption group. Furthermore, the counsellor identifies major themes emerging from the group and gives their unconscious emotional sense back to the group, going from the *here and now* to the *there and then*. Furthermore, thanks to the active listening,

the counsellor stays with the anxieties associated with this new experience and on the fast, delicate, and complex work on forthcoming separation. In contrast, the observer must be able to assume the function of a 'toilet-breast' (Meltzer, 1978) and be a receptacle for projections, making the anxieties more manageable for group members and thus facilitating the counsellor's work. Usually, the group projects its superego function on the observer and this allows the group to work with less strong resistances. In this way, persecutory and evaluative fantasies are shifted onto the observer, protecting the counsellor from the aggression, so that his/her interventions are perceived as non-toxic nourishment. Thus, the counsellor would not trigger negative transferences and this would allow each member to transform his/her impulses, achieving some grade of autonomy. In other words, the observer acts as a filter between the counsellor and the group. The observer also draws up a report based on observations of the group and his or her countertransference, being a witness of the relational and institutional group dynamic (Chiodi et al., 2009). Supervision, which usually takes place at the end of each session, is fundamental to the process; during this part of the session all staff members discuss unconscious processes, countertransference, defences and fantasies. The analysis of this material allows the supervisor to perform the function of *rêverie* (Bion, 1962); this is sometimes difficult due to the short duration of the treatment and the concentration of the contents.

Academic identity of future psychologists

Academic identity has been conceptualised in different ways, and these various definitions may represent parts of a whole. For example, the term academic identity has been used to refer to the sense of belonging in a school setting (Goodenow, 1993), to the degree of importance placed on doing well in school (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and to the alignment of current academic behaviour with career expectations (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Walker and Syed (2013) suggested that academic identity should be defined as the degree to which students identify with their main academic subject, arguing that this definition is more in line with Eriksonian theory of identity because it contains both an identification component (the academic subject) and an identity component. It has been reported that college students are more likely than their working counterparts to engage in adaptive and ruminative forms of exploration – that is a recurrent concern about making the 'correct' choice often remaining stuck in the exploration process – and less likely to enact identity commitments, or rather the enduring choices of adhering to a specific identity definition (Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, & Pollock, 2008). This may indicate that college functions as an *institutionalised moratorium*, a sort of 'identity laboratory' where emerging adults can explore different identity possibilities (Côté, 2006; Erikson, 1968). Some students may already have some important points of reference for their identity based on their identity as students of a specific subject.

Identifying with a subject and a future profession also allows students to feel that they belong to a group of peers and to differentiate themselves from students of other subjects as well as giving them role models to emulate (e.g. teachers). At the same time, emerging adulthood is the time when young people start entering the labour market and prepare to make commitments to a career (Arnett, 2007).

Usually, students of psychology – like college students in general – are young adults aged from 20 to 30 years old facing the developmental challenges of this specific life stage. They are somewhere between adolescence and adulthood, a transitional stage that can lead to feelings of alienation which it takes a massive effort to integrate. Young adults should have recently completed the developmental tasks of adolescence and be trying to construct a new lifestyle that is closer to their current goals and new resources and abilities (Arnett, 2007). During this stage adolescent narcissism declines and the Other is perceived as separate from the Self, representing a real opportunity to establish an adult object relationship. All the body-related aspects of adolescence, such as sexual arousal, the discovery of orgasmic ability etc., are replaced by a new capacity for reflection and self-reflection that will give the young adult the opportunity to realise his or her life project (Shulman, Blatt, & Feldman, 2006). Indeed, young adulthood is a difficult developmental stage during which individuals have to make choices and reconcile their own and their parents' desires. For instance, the choice of academic subject is often influenced by the projective identifications of parents who project onto their children parts of themselves that remained unsatisfied. The realisation of one's life project can be complicated by the typical difficulties of young adulthood, which involves dealing with the developmental tasks of the *second phase of separation-individuation*, including the establishment of ego continuity (Blos, 1967). This process is experienced as a real mourning for parts of the self strongly related to the introjected parental images. Furthermore, it leads to specific anxieties related to dealing with feelings of loss, uncertainty and nostalgia as well as contrasting feelings of anger, aggression and guilt, or feelings of revenge that have to do with the fantasy of taking the place of one's parents. We think that in this stage it is possible to reach the adult mental condition which, according to Freud, can be identified by a new ability to love and work.

Becoming a psychologist has to be seen in the context of the difficult developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. Kullasepp (2010) argued that becoming a psychologist is a process which involves constructing a professional identity in parallel with becoming more and more aware of oneself, or rather with becoming more certain of who one is. Psychologists always have to deal with their own emotions (Carli, 2010). Indeed, as experts on relationships and communication psychologists use themselves as the main tool of work. This is a particularly important aspect of training in psychodynamically-oriented clinical psychology, in which particular attention is given to the concepts of transference, countertransference, projective identification, and so on.

During the difficult process of identity construction undergraduate trainees in clinical psychology should acquire tools, methods, and techniques which enable them to conduct preventive work, make diagnoses, provide psychological support, and deliver rehabilitation programmes. The slow acquisition of these new skills is intertwined with the tasks specific to the students' developmental stage. All this suggests that brief interventions, such as psychodynamic counselling, are well-suited to the developmental tasks facing university students as young adults. Indeed, such interventions provide students with the opportunity for further integration through the creation of links between new aspects of their Self and their personal story, as well as by discouraging regression which would recall a child's condition of dependency (Hetherington, 1999). This is why we think that, as in a medieval workshop, a university laboratory of group psychodynamic counselling can facilitate the acquisition of new professional skills whilst also addressing the typical problems of emerging adulthood.

This study

The aim of this study was to assess the efficacy of group psychodynamic counselling as a means of reinforcing both the academic identity of final-year undergraduates in clinical psychology and their psychological well-being. To control for the effects of other variables on the change process we also assessed a control group of final-year undergraduates in clinical psychology who did not have experience of group psychodynamic counselling.

We hypothesised that after the group psychodynamic counselling intervention the experimental group would score better on measures of academic identity and well-being whilst there would be little or no change in the scores of the control group over the same period. We also hypothesised that, although the groups would be similar before the intervention, afterwards the experimental group would score better than the control group on measures of academic identity and well-being.

Method

Participants and procedures

Participants were recruited from two university laboratories of clinical and dynamic psychology in the last year of a degree course in clinical psychology at the same university – the University of Naples Federico II.

The experimental group, comprising 33 final-year undergraduates in psychology, participated in a course of group psychodynamic counselling based on Bion's (1962) *learning from experience* methodology. According to Bion (1962), thought is the function which allows us to learn from the experience. To reach this objective, it is necessary that, within the relationship between container and contained, a transformation of the emotional experience and

sense impressions occurs, and what makes this possible is the function of *rêverie*. In our case, students' emotional experience to be worked through and transformed is that of experiencing a delicate transition phase associated with the status of final-year undergraduates in clinical psychology. Indeed, these students are about to finalise their university studies and find themselves facing uncertainty about the future. Thus, the experience of group psychodynamic counselling becomes a container for anxieties and emotional experiences not yet digested and, as such, it contains a transformative potential.

The clinical psychology course lasted three months and was organised into 6 eight-hour sessions. Participants were divided into 3 small groups for sessions of group psychodynamic counselling which took place at the beginning of classes and lasted 1 h and 15 min. Before the first counselling session the 'work couple' – the counsellor and the observer – were introduced and the students were told

This is a space in which it is possible to think about your status as final-year undergraduates in clinical psychology. In this space it is possible to say everything you think, using free associations, fantasies, thoughts, and dreams. Everything that emerges in this space will belong to the group and thus be treated as group material. There are only two fundamental rules. The first is that everything said here will belong to the group and will not be shared with outsiders. The second is that everything taking place outside the group which is felt to be relevant to this space must be reported in this group space.

This means that we provided participants with a focus which was specific and open at the same time. It was specific, because participants were invited to think about their status of final-year undergraduates in clinical psychology, and open because they were free to think of this in different subjective ways. The group nature of this experience implies that the counsellor avoids direct interventions on the individual, instead considering that each communication represents a voice of the whole group, coming from a unique complex mental apparatus. At the end of the group psychodynamic counselling session the groups were combined for further work, using both cognitive stimuli – such as readings related to psychodynamic counselling or clinical cases – and emotional stimuli – such as role playing in which participants acted as counsellor or patient. All counsellors and observers had a solid training in psychodynamic psychotherapy with children, adolescents, or adults, based in particular on the Tavistock model. For instance, both counsellors and observers were trained in the Infant Observation methodology and in the psychoanalytic work within social institutions.

The control group, comprising 16 participants, took a course in dynamic psychology which was intended to equip them to use the tools and methods of the psychodynamic interview. This course was of the same duration as the course followed by the experimental group but, although it used active learning techniques based on emotionality and on learning from experience – such as

role playing and Social Dreaming Matrixes (Lawrence, 2003, 2007) – promoting a change process related to academic identity was not among its objectives.

The socio-demographic characteristics of the two groups are reported in Table 1.

All data were collected in accordance with the Italian Law on Privacy and Data Protection 196/2003 and became property of the Department of Humanistic Studies of the University of Naples Federico II; they were stored in a database accessible only to the Principal Investigator. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board and ethics committee of the first author's university.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the experimental group ($n = 37$) and the control group ($n = 16$).

	Experimental group No. (%) or Mean \pm SD	Control group No. (%) or Mean \pm SD	χ^2
Age	22.67 \pm 1.79	23.69 \pm 3.26	.156
Gender			.262
Male	3(8.1)	3(18.8)	
Female	34(91.9)	13(81.2)	
Marital status			.090
Single	37(100)	14(87.5)	
Married	–	2(12.5)	
Divorced	–	–	
Separated	–	–	
Sexual orientation			.534
Heterosexual	36(97.3)	15(93.8)	
Gay/Lesbian	–	–	
Bisexual	1(2.7)	1(6.2)	
Other	–	–	
Religious education during childhood			.444
Yes	32(86.5)	15(93.8)	
No	5(13.5)	1(6.2)	
Current religious faith			.214
Yes	14(37.8)	9(56.2)	
No	23(62.2)	7(43.8)	
Political orientation			.365
Conservative	–	1(6.2)	
Moderate	18(48.6)	6(37.5)	
Progressive	15(40.5)	6(37.5)	
Current partner			.405
Yes	26(70.3)	13(81.2)	
No	11(29.7)	3(18.8)	
Other degree			.156
Yes	1(2.7)	2(12.5)	
No	36(97.3)	14(87.5)	

Notes: Group differences in age were assessed using the Student's t test for independent samples. Group differences in gender and political orientation were assessed with the χ^2 test.

Measures

Socio-demographic characteristics

Socio-demographic variables included age, gender (male; female; specified other), marital status (single; married; divorced; separated; widowed), sexual orientation (heterosexual; gay/lesbian; bisexual; specified other), religious education (yes; no) and political orientation (conservative; moderate; progressive). Participants were also asked if they practiced a religious faith, if they had a stable partner, if they had previously been enrolled in another degree course, and if they had a bachelor's degree in a subject other than Psychology.

Personal well-being

We used the short form of the Psychological Wellbeing Scale (PWBS) developed by Ryff (1989) and validated in Italy by Ruini, Ottolini, Rafanelli, Ryff, and Fava (2003) to assess well-being. The PWBS consists of 42 items to which responses are given using a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'Strongly disagree' to 6 = 'Strongly agree'. The scale assesses six areas of psychological well-being: *Autonomy*, i.e. independence and self-determination (e.g. 'I am not afraid to voice my opinions, even when they are in opposition to those of most other people'); *Environmental Mastery*, the ability to manage one's life (e.g. 'In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live'); *Personal Growth*, that is openness to new experiences (e.g. 'I am not interested in activities that will expand my horizons'); *Positive Relations*, the quality of personal relationships (e.g. 'Most people see me as loving and affectionate'); *Purpose in Life* or the belief that one's life is meaningful (e.g. 'I live life one day at a time and don't really think about the future'); *Self-Acceptance*, i.e. the extent to which one has a positive view of oneself and one's past life (e.g. 'When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out'). In all categories high scores indicate that the respondent has mastered that area of life. In our sample the values of Cronbach's alpha for each subscale before and after the intervention were as follows: Autonomy ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .748$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .766$), Environmental Mastery ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .884$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .893$), Personal Growth ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .773$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .726$), Positive Relations ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .878$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .842$), Purpose in Life ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .746$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .789$) and Self-Acceptance ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .801$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .847$).

Academic identity

We assessed academic identity using an adaptation of the Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (U-MICS) by Crocetti, Rubini, and Meeus (2008), which was validated for use in Italy by Crocetti and colleagues (2010). Based on a previous work by Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, and Vollebergh (1999), the authors of the U-MICS proposed a three-factor model of identity focused on the dynamics through which adolescents form, evaluate, and revise their

identities over time. The U-MICS measures three identity dimensions: (1) *Commitment*, which refers to enacting enduring choices with regard to different identity domains and to the self-confidence derived from these choices; (2) *In-Depth Exploration*, the extent in which people actively think about their commitments, reflect on their choices, look for additional relevant information and discuss them with others; (3) *Reconsideration of Commitment*, the comparison of present commitments with potential alternatives on the grounds that current commitments are no longer appropriate. The U-MICS assesses two identity domains. The first domain is School Identity that, in the present study, was not adapted, remaining unchanged. Sample items assessing commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment with respect to School Identity are, respectively, 'My education gives me security in life', 'I try to find out a lot about my education' and 'I often think that a different education would make my life more interesting'. The second domain is called Relational Identity/Best Friend. We were interested in assessing relationships in the university context and so we adapted the items to refer to relationships with 'colleagues' rather than 'friends'. Sample items for the three dimensions are, respectively, 'My colleagues give me security in life', 'I try to find out a lot about my colleagues' and 'I often think it would be better to try to find a different colleague'. Values of Cronbach's alpha for each dimension subscale before and after the intervention are as follows: School Identity Commitment ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .846$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .874$); School Identity In-Depth Exploration ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .860$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .875$); School Identity Reconsideration of Commitment ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .787$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .781$); Relational Identity/Best Friend Commitment ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .921$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .925$); Relational Identity/Best Friend In-Depth Exploration ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .741$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .747$); Relational Identity/Best Friend Reconsideration of Commitment ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .878$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .903$).

Statistical analyses

Some preliminary analyses were performed before the hypotheses were tested. All analyses were performed using SPSS 20, except for the multiple imputation of missing values, for which R was used. First, missing values were imputed with the multiple imputation procedure (Graham, 2009) using Honaker, King, and Blackwell's (2011) package, Amelia II for R. After this, outliers (standardised scores greater than 3.29 or smaller than -3.29) were removed from the sample (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001); in practice this meant that only one participant's data were removed from the final sample.

Finally, we used the Wilcoxon signed-rank test for within-group comparisons of well-being and identity intervention before and after the intervention period. Between-group differences at both time-points were assessed using Student's *t* test.

Results

There were no baseline group differences in any of the socio-demographic variables and so none of them were included as covariates in the subsequent analysis.

There were some changes during the intervention period. The experimental group had higher mean score on the PWBS subscales *Environmental Mastery*, *Personal Growth*, *Positive Relations*, *Purpose in Life*, and *Self-Acceptance* after the group psychodynamic counselling intervention. The increase in mean *Autonomy* score was not significant. After the intervention the experimental group also had higher mean scores on the U-MICS dimensions *Commitment* and *In-depth exploration* with respect to both *School Identity* and *Relational Identity* whereas mean *Reconsideration of Commitment* scores with respect to both identity domains were lower. In the control group the only change which occurred during the intervention period was a reduction in mean PWBS *Personal Growth* score. Results of the within-groups comparisons are reported in Table 2.

Analysis of between-group differences revealed that, as expected, there were no differences between the experimental and control groups before the intervention period. After the intervention the experimental group had higher scores than the control group on the PWBS *Autonomy*, *Personal Growth*, *Positive Relations*, *Purpose in Life*, and *Self-Acceptance* subscales, on the U-MICS *In-depth Exploration* dimension of *School Identity* and *Relational Identity* domain, and on the U-MICS *Commitment* dimension of *Relational Identity*. After the intervention the experimental group also had lower scores than the control group with respect to the U-MICS *Reconsideration of Commitment* dimension of both *School Identity* and *Relational Identity*. Results of the between-groups comparisons are reported in Table 3.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to demonstrate the efficacy of group psychodynamic counselling in strengthening the academic identity of final-year psychology undergraduates and increasing their psychological well-being. In the Introduction we used the medieval workshop as a metaphor for the group psychodynamic counselling course, because it was conducted by expert clinical psychologists who tried to transmit their own competence to the students allowing them to learn from experience. Indeed, this relationship was very similar to that between teachers and their young apprentices in medieval workshops. The group psychodynamic counselling was also intended to reinforce students' academic identity and improve some aspects of their psychological well-being. The results suggest that this kind of intervention is indeed an effective method of achieving those objectives as the experimental group had higher scores for academic identity and psychological well-being after group

Table 2. Within-group comparisons (Wilcoxon signed-rank test) of mean scores on PWBS and U-MICS subscales before and after the intervention period for the experimental group ($n = 37$) and the control group ($n = 16$).

	Experimental Group			Control Group		
	Before M(SD)	After M(SD)	Z	Before M(SD)	After M(SD)	Z
PWBS						
Autonomy	4.49(.67)	4.72(.58)	-1.64	4.19(.67)	3.96(.63)	-91
Environmental Mastery	4.06(.57)	4.24(.51)	-2.04*	4.02(.51)	4.17(.73)	-1.17
Personal Growth	5.03(.59)	5.37(.49)	-3.85***	4.87(.64)	4.45(.41)	-2.21*
Positive Relations	4.73(.81)	5.05(.61)	-2.78**	4.49(.87)	4.50(.67)	-17
Purpose in Life	4.61(.58)	4.87(.49)	-2.63**	4.53(.68)	4.44(.56)	-73
Self-Acceptance	4.23(.80)	4.66(.62)	-2.65**	4.05(.75)	4.22(.68)	-98
U-MICS						
<i>School Identity</i>						
Commitment	3.33(.54)	3.66(.63)	-2.76**	3.24(.65)	3.24(.78)	-17
In-Depth Exploration	4.11(.48)	4.64(.43)	-4.66***	3.86(.69)	3.67(.63)	-85
Reconsideration of Commitment	1.73(.75)	1.50(.61)	-2.28*	1.77(.55)	1.98(.80)	-1.12
<i>Relational Identity</i>						
Commitment	3.23(.93)	3.77(.92)	-3.06***	2.85(.92)	2.92(.77)	-28
In-Depth Exploration	3.33(.74)	3.64(.68)	-2.34*	2.95(.68)	2.91(.53)	-16
Reconsideration of Commitment	2.12(.99)	1.60(.73)	-3.38***	2.12(.85)	2.22(.68)	-31

Notes: PWBS = Psychological Wellbeing Scale; U-MICS = Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Assessments of group differences (Student's *t*-test) in mean scores on the PWBS and U-MICS subscales at both time points (experimental group *n* = 37; control group *n* = 16)

	Before				After			
	Experimental Group M(SD)	Control Group M(SD)	95% CI for Mean Difference	<i>t</i>	Experimental Group M(SD)	Control Group M(SD)	95% CI for Mean Difference	<i>t</i>
PWBS								
Autonomy	4.49(.67)	4.19(.67)	-.09, .70	1.50	4.72(.58)	3.96(.63)	-.41, 1.12	4.17***
Environmental Mastery	4.06(.57)	4.02(.51)	-.28, .38	.30	4.24(.51)	4.17(.73)	-.28, .42	.36
Personal Growth	5.03(.59)	4.87(.64)	-.20, .53	.88	5.37(.49)	4.45(.41)	.65, 1.21	7.11***
Positive Relations	4.73(.81)	4.49(.87)	-.26, .73	.92	5.05(.61)	4.50(.67)	.17, .92	2.80**
Purpose in Life	4.61(.58)	4.53(.68)	-.28, .46	.45	4.87(.49)	4.44(.56)	.13, .74	2.72**
Self-Acceptance	4.23(.80)	4.05(.75)	-.29, .65	.80	4.66(.62)	4.22(.68)	.02, .85	2.11*
U-MICS								
<i>School Identity</i>								
Commitment	3.33(.54)	3.24(.65)	-.25, .44	.50	3.66(.63)	3.24(.78)	.02, .83	1.93
In-Depth Exploration	4.11(.48)	3.86(.69)	-.08, .58	1.33	4.64(.43)	3.67(.63)	.67, 1.26	5.60***
Reconsideration of Commitment	1.73(.75)	1.77(.55)	-.46, .38	-.22	1.50(.61)	1.98(.80)	-.88, -.07	-2.12*
<i>Relational Identity</i>								
Commitment	3.23(.93)	2.85(.92)	-.18, .93	1.38	3.77(.92)	2.92(.77)	.32, 1.38	3.47***
In-Depth Exploration	3.33(.74)	2.95(.68)	-.05, .82	1.84	3.64(.68)	2.91(.53)	.35, 1.12	4.26***
Reconsideration of Commitment	2.12(.99)	2.12(.85)	-.57, .57	-.01	1.60(.73)	2.22(.68)	-1.04, -.18	-2.94***

Notes: PWBS = Psychological Wellbeing Scale; U-MICS = Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale.

**p* < .05;

***p* < .01;

****p* < .001.

psychodynamic counselling. Specifically, it seems that group psychodynamic counselling made students feel more able to manage their lives and more open to new experiences as well as leading them to perceive their relationships as more positive and more satisfying, encouraging them to believe that their life is meaningful and promoting greater self-acceptance. It also emerged that group psychodynamic counselling allowed students to reconsider their commitments as a result of their in-depth exploration, but not to change them, as if group psychodynamic counselling had supported the choice in a single direction.

It should be noted that the experimental group was not a clinical group, or rather that participants did not receive group psychodynamic counselling because of psychological distress and so their improvement in psychological well-being has to be interpreted from the perspective of Bion's (1962) theoretical work on learning from experience. The final year of a degree course might represent a turning point in students' lives and thus a potential crisis. Indeed, students are poised to leave the reassuring and containing educational environment and preparing to enter the job market. This turning point can lead to the reactivation of separation anxieties which are compounded by the difficulties associated with young adulthood as a developmental stage. There has been little research on the efficacy of individual psychodynamic counselling in final-year university students (e.g. Rickinson, 1997, 1998). Final-year students are at a phase in the development of professional identity where they have to begin to think seriously about their future, the choices to be made, and the risks entailed. To this end, a dream told by a participant seems to represent the anxieties towards the future and the function of containment by the group psychodynamic counselling experience: 'there was a black hole that distressed me a lot and someone pulled me out with his hands'. Free associations of the group led to see hands as something external that takes him back to the past and the black hole as the black future, an unknown future that attracts and frightens at the same time. Thanks to this dream, we had the chance to help the group to work through its deep anxiety of separation from the lab experience, as well as its anxiety of the unfamiliar and 'obscure' future.

Bruss and Kopala (1993) applied Winnicott's (1965) work to professional identity of psychologists in training, arguing that students must leave behind the holding environment, moving from dependence to independence and learning to manage without the care provided by the university. As this study demonstrated, group psychodynamic counselling, like individual psychodynamic counselling (e.g. Adamo, 1999; Copley, 1976; Davanloo, 1978; Polacco Williams, 1990; Richards, 1999; Salzberger Wittenberg, 1986; Spurling, 2009; Valerio & Adamo, 1995), activated self-reflection and change processes. In this context, the data on reconsideration of commitments are noteworthy. It seems that group psychodynamic counselling is an intervention which reinforces participants' choices, tying their self-image to a clearer and more structured professional identity. Therefore, it is possible to hypothesise that this experience

supports the educational process, allowing students to explore their motivations and to project their Self in the role of clinical psychologist. Along this line, during the last session of one of the psychodynamic group counselling, a participant, who was also a singer, told the group what her closet contains: behind the first door there were her clothes, behind the second one she had set aside things to follow her university career. Behind the same door there were also two guitars (one belonging to her and the other to her father), a microphone and a sketchbook. This participant said she knew well that she wanted to be neither the musician nor the singer nor the illustrator, but the psychotherapist. Thanks to this evocative image, participants had the chance to work on their motivations to become clinical psychologists or psychotherapists, drawing on childhood creativity and settling their accounts with the past, the present, and the future.

The changes in psychological well-being, self-reflection, and in-depth exploration of commitments to colleagues and to educational choice were probably facilitated by the group format. Thanks to group-specific psychological processes, such as lateral transference and resonances, the group can be a powerful catalyst of change, due to its ability to activate individuals' internal resources. The group activates a hope that something can change and belief in the possibility of changes seems to be reinforced by horizontal mirroring between peers. One last element of the intervention worth commenting on is the role of the 'work couple', i.e. the counsellor and the silent observer. We firmly believe that reconsideration of commitment decreased after the intervention due to the group's identification with this couple, two expert clinical psychologists working in the field of clinical psychology who were demonstrating their competence in the field. This identification may have reinforced students' previous choices, placing them nearer to the professional figure of the clinical psychologist they were striving to become. To this end, an interesting dream was told in the second last session of one of the group psychodynamic counselling:

We were in an open and green space that made me think of Virgil's *Bucolics*. It was spring or summer and we had to meet at the center of this space. It was us! There was a pool in which there were the chairs arranged in a circle and we were immersed up to the head. The water was warm. The counsellor and the observer arrived a bit late.

Among other possible meanings, this dream shows the transference of the group towards the work couple and the emotional quality of the experience that makes the group feel immersed in an instinctual, unconscious and 'warm' dimension. Indeed, the water seems to recall the amniotic fluid that allows the group to grow up and to feel contained. The fact that the work couple arrived late might mean that the group wanted to exclude the 'teachers' and was ready to stand on its own two feet. In the last session of the same group, another participant told the last dream of the experience:

This was the most beautiful dream I have ever had. I had wounded my leg and I could not manage a path that I was expected to do. I found myself in a kind of videogame where I could choose what animal to ride... and I saw myself in the videogame, while I galloped on different animals depending on the need of the moment. At the beginning I chose a leopard, then a hippo because I had to cross a river, and then a thousand other animals. At the end I could walk the road despite the wounded leg.

Free associations of the group led to talk about the skills gained during the counselling experience to find adaptive solutions even when the tools available are not sufficient. More generally, we believe that this experiential course enabled the students to grow both personally and professionally and could become one of the many tools of the clinical psychologist.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample is obviously not representative of the population of final-year undergraduates in clinical psychology; however this limitation must be set in the context of the exploratory and experiential nature of the intervention. Second, we did not carry out a follow-up assessment to determine the persistence of the changes observed; this should be addressed in future longitudinal research. Finally, the control group was smaller than the experimental group. A further consideration is that the control group, like the experimental group, followed a psychology course with the potential to activate self-reflection and change processes; however their course did not share the transformative objectives of the course in which the experimental group participated, as well as the specific focus on academic identity and well-being.

Conclusions and implications

Educational and training institutions should provide opportunities for students to learn from experience and thus add a new tool to their repertoire. The learning from experience methodology, which is routed in the clinical approach, can help to achieve several objectives simultaneously. For instance, one of its main advantages is that it provides an opportunity to acquire an emotional understanding of a technique and is thus undoubtedly more effective than purely cognitive learning. At the same time, this clinical method can allow development of a binocular vision able to pay attention to both identity and well-being dimensions. It would be interesting to test the effectiveness of this clinical method in students of other subjects in order to evaluate any effects related to academic identity. It would also be interesting to test the study in first-year students who have recently left the protective environment of secondary school as this developmental transition might activate depersonalisation anxieties which

could be explored in a group made up of people facing the same identity challenge. In this case, the institution itself that might generate depersonalisation anxieties could simultaneously serve the function of containing those anxieties.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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