

Rewriting the Hero's Story: An Empirical Study on Narrative Therapy Group Counseling on College Students' Psychological Capital and Self-Identity

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Abstract: This study examined the immediate and sustained effects of a "Hero's Journey" group counseling program based on narrative therapy on college students' psychological capital and self-identity. A pretest-posttest follow-up design with an experimental and a control group was employed. Twenty-four college students from Anhui University of Finance and Economics were recruited and randomly assigned to either an experimental group or a control group. The experimental group received a five-week narrative therapy group counseling, while the control group received no intervention. Participants completed the Psychological Capital Questionnaire and the Self-Identity Scale at pretest, posttest, and one-month follow-up. Within-group comparisons showed that self-identity scores in the experimental group increased significantly from pretest to posttest ($P < 0.01$) and remained significantly higher at follow-up ($P < 0.05$). The psychological capital scores of experimental group improved but not significantly. No significant changes occurred in the control group. Between-group comparisons of change scores (posttest minus pretest) showed significantly greater gains in both psychological capital and self-identity in the experimental group versus the control group ($P < 0.05$). Narrative therapy group counseling enhanced college students' self-identity effectively, even sustained at one-month follow-up, and produced an immediate positive effect on psychological capital. These findings support it's useful among university students' mental health services.

1. Introduction

Psychological capital is a positive psychological state in individual growth and development, which consist with self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience^[1]. Self-identity, in sample terms, is a person's awareness and acceptance of own identity, values, and life goals^[2]. Psychological capital and self-identity are important indicators to measure college students' mental health. They are also showing closely correlated with academic performance, social relationships and future planning^{[3][4]}. However, the reality is that many college students are facing multiple challenges including academic stress, interpersonal distress, and future uncertainty. The overall level of psychological capital and self-identity, most of them still have a lot of room for improvement.

Narrative therapy was founded by White and Epston. The core of narrative therapy is to separate people and problems, and to help individuals construct new self-identity by retelling life stories^[5]. In narrative groups, each participant develops an unique and context-specific story^[6]. The significance of these stories is not an objective truth, but a metaphorical agreements based on the social, cultural or political context of the group members^[7]. Because of this, participants can re-examine their problems from various perspectives, which in turn leads to changes. Existing empirical studies have shown that narrative therapy can effectively reduce the non-suicidal self-injury, anxiety and depression among adolescents with depression^[8], and improve self-efficacy and self-esteem^[9]. Nevertheless, many studies focus on a single psychological indicator, rarely analyze psychological capital and self-identity as outcome variables at the same time, and lack of follow-up specifically for Chinese college students.

Accordingly, this study designed a group counseling program based on narrative therapy, using the metaphorical narrative of the "Hero's Journey". The program including five semi-structured sessions aimed at helping participants enhance their psychological capital and self-identity. A pretest, posttest and follow-up design with experimental and control groups was adopted to examine the effects and sustainability of intervention, with the purpose of providing empirical evidence for Chinese university mental health education.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The study recruited 24 volunteers from Anhui University of Finance and Economics and randomly allocated them into experimental group (n=12) or control group (n=12). The experimental group including 4 male, while the control group comprised 5 males. The average age across both groups was around 20 years. During the study, two individuals in experimental group dropped, one dropped during the intervention phase and the other dropped at the follow-up, whereas two participants in the control group dropped at the follow-up. Consequently, the final sample in the experimental group at posttest is 11, at follow-up is 10. In contrast, there were 12 and 10 participants in the control group at the same time points.

2.2 Measures

Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ). The PCQ developed by Luthans^[10] includes 24 items, covering four dimensions: self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism (each dimension contains 6 items). Participants rated the items on a 6-point Likert scale, and higher total scores indicate greater psychological capital. The scale has a good reliability and validity in Chinese samples, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.85 above^[11].

Self Identity Scale (SIS). The SIS was initially developed by Ochse and Plug (1986) and later revised by Chinese scholars^[12]. It consists of 19 items on a 4-point Likert scale, evaluating the clarity and continuity of an individual's identity, values, and life goals. Higher scores reflect a stronger self-identity. The scale has been widely used among high school and college students and demonstrated good reliability and validity^[12].

2.3 Group Counseling Program

We designed a five-session group counseling program based on narrative therapy and integrated the OH Cards into the metaphor of "Hero's Journey". The structure of each session and the corresponding narrative therapy techniques are summarized in Table 1. The program follows the

core process of narrative therapy: externalization, deconstruction, reconstruction, witnessing, and the therapeutic documents^[13]. Within a secure and supportive group environment, this process helps group members re-author their life stories and explore their internal strengths. The all design, we consistently followed the core narrative therapy principle that "The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem." Core structural elements of the Hero's Journey-protagonist, ordeal, mission, allies, transformation, and return-were directly used in the counseling activities^[14]. With the symbolic imagery of OH Cards and the supportive atmosphere of the group, participants could step cack from problem-dominated descriptions of their lives, reconstruct their own heroic narratives, and shift from a state of passive suffering to active meaning construction.

The group was led by two trained facilitators and one observer. The facilitators followed the session protocol, while the observer tracked how they guided the interaction of group without taking part. During these sessions, the facilitators used double listening-paying attention not only to the problem stories but also to participants' strengths and successful coping strategies. In that way, participants felt safe to show both vulnerability and strength. A trusting, supportive atmosphere was deliberately cultivated to encourage self-awareness and personal growth^[15]. After each session, the leaders reflected on their own practice, and the observer offered feedback. All three facilitators are full-time mental health teachers at the university, had completed professional training in group counseling, and brought prior experience in both narrative therapy and group facilitation.

Table 1 Group Counseling Program

Session	Main Activities	Objectives	Narrative Therapy Techniques
S1 First Gathering of Heroes	1. Getting acquainted 2. Hero code naming 3. Group contract signing	Helping members establish initial connections, transition from real-life identity to hero role, and build group safety and sense of belonging.	Narrative Metaphor, initiating self-narrative storytelling through metaphor. Group Witnessing, making name tags and signing group contract.
S2 Naming the Dragon	1.Hero statue 2.Creating a dragon file 3.Discussion and sharing	Helping members externalize problems as a devil dragon, enhance sense of control over the problem through four steps of externalization.	Externalization, personifying the problem as a dragon to separate the person from the problem. Deconstruction, exploring the social cultural context behind the problem rather than blaming individual deficits.
S3 Summoning My Heroic Companions	1.The witch's antidote 2.Summoning heroic companions 3.Connection and messages from companions	Helping members connect inner desired strengths with real-life people, build support systems and develop alternative stories.	Remembering Conversation, gaining support from significant others. Bi-directional relationship, strengthening narrative links of the support system.
S4 Discovering Shining Traits	1.Trait detective 2.Strength bombardment 3.Recording shining traits	Helping members identify unique outcomes from their own experiences and find their inner traits and abilities.	Double Listening, hearing unique events that do not fit the problem story. Unique Outcomes: excavating shining traits obscured by dominant narratives.
S5 Witnessing and Blessing	1.Hero theater flash mob 2.Flowing blessings 3.Farewell ceremony	Integrating gains from previous sessions. Consolidating a new identity through collective witnessing and blessing. Completing a ritualized farewell and empowering future actions.	Therapeutic document, creating blessing scrolls to solidify positive experiences. Identity blueprint, self-blessing sentence patterns to strengthen identification with self-traits.

2.4 Procedure

Before the intervention, both the experimental group and the control group completed the pretest. The experimental group attended five weekly group counseling sessions, each lasting about 2 hours. During this period, the control group did not receive any intervention and went about their usual academic and daily routines. The posttest was carried out after the intervention, and the follow-up test was conducted one month later (before the winter break). All assessments were accomplished online. The study followed ethical guidelines. All participants signed informed consent forms and retained the right to withdraw at any time.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 26.0. First, we ran independent-sample t-tests on pretest scores to examine baseline comparability between groups. Second, we used paired-sample t-tests to examine within-group changes from pretest to posttest and from pretest to follow-up. Third, we conducted independent-sample t-tests on the difference scores (posttest minus pretest, follow-up minus pretest) to compare intervention effects between groups. For missing data, we adopted an available-case analysis approach was adopted: participants with complete data at each time point were included in the respective comparisons, and no imputation was performed.

3. Results

3.1 Baseline Comparability

Table 2 Pretest Score Comparisons Between Groups(M ± SD)

Variable	Experimental Group (n=12)	Control Group (n=12)	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Psychological capital	103.70±13.01	109.90±17.34	-0.99	0.333
Self-identity	49.86±3.58	54.26±6.46	-2.07	0.054

As shown in Table 2, there were no significant differences between the experimental group and the control group in psychological capital or self-identity at baseline ($P > 0.05$), indicating that the two groups were comparable.

3.2 Immediate Post-Intervention Effects

Within-group pretest-posttest comparisons. As shown in Table 3, the experimental group showed an increase in psychological capital from pretest to posttest, but the difference did not reach statistical significance ($P = 0.057$). The self-identity scores of the experimental group increased significantly ($P < 0.01$). No significant changes were observed in the control group on any variable ($P > 0.05$).

Table 3 Pretest and Posttest Score Comparisons Within Each Group(M ± SD)

	Experimental group			Control group		
	Pretest (n=11)	Post-test (n=11)	<i>t</i>	Pretest (n=12)	Post-test (n=12)	<i>t</i>
Psychological capital	104.08±13.57	115.97±13.78	2.15	109.90±17.34	106.00±17.80	-1.28
Self-identity	49.96±3.74	53.38±3.24	3.44**	54.26±6.46	53.06±7.08	-0.69

Note: ** $P < 0.01$

Between-group comparisons of change scores. Independent-sample t-tests on difference scores (posttest minus pretest) showed that the experimental group had significantly larger gains than the control group in both psychological capital and self-identity ($P < 0.05$), indicating that the group counseling program was superior to no intervention (see Table 4).

Table 4 Pretest-Posttest Difference Scores Between Groups ($M \pm SD$)

	Experimental group (n=11)	Control group (n=12)	<i>t</i>
Psychological capital	11.89 ± 18.31	-3.90 ± 10.56	2.50*
Self-identity	3.42 ± 3.30	-1.20 ± 5.99	2.31*

Note: * $P < 0.05$

3.3 Sustainability of Intervention Effects

Within-group pretest vs. follow-up comparisons. As shown in Table 5, the experimental group's self-identity scores at follow-up remained significantly higher than pretest scores ($P < 0.05$), while psychological capital scores were higher than pretest but not significantly. In the control group, psychological capital showed a decreasing trend and self-identity a slight increase, but neither reached statistical significance.

Table 5 Pretest and follow-up score comparisons within each group ($M \pm SD$)

	Experimental group			Control group		
	Pretest (n=10)	Post-test (n=10)	<i>t</i>	Pretest (n=10)	Post-test (n=10)	<i>t</i>
Psychological capital	103.44 ± 14.14	111.12 ± 9.29	1.75	110.40 ± 18.77	99.48 ± 26.53	-1.42
Self-identity	50.16 ± 3.89	53.52 ± 4.36	3.06*	55.52 ± 5.60	56.80 ± 6.98	0.90

Note: * $P < 0.05$

4. Discussion

4.1 Effect on Self-Identity and Its Mechanisms

In this study, narrative therapy group counseling helped participants improve their self-identity and these gains maintained durably even a month later. These results lines up with earlier evidence. Liang and Yang reported something similar: narrative interventions markedly strengthened self-identity of high school students and the effects lasted beyond the end of intervention^[16]. Zhao et al. also concluded both immediate and sustained improvements in self-identity after narrative group counseling among university students^[17]. Zhou's qualitative research revealed the joint work of deconstruction and reconstruction within group contexts actively promoted identity reformation particularly through collaborative meaning-making and narrative renegotiation^[18]. Looking across the evidence from different developmental periods and with varied methods, a consistent picture emerges: narrative therapy's influence on self-identity holds up reliably across contexts.

Three connected therapeutic steps help account for these gains. First, in Session 4, unique outcome questioning guided participants to notice moments that clashed with their negative self-image, enabling them to identify exceptional experiences-episodes that contradicted their entrenched and problem-saturated accounts of themselves. For example, participants who repeatedly labeled themselves as incompetent were prompted by the leaders to recall specific

situations where they demonstrated competence, agency, or resilience. It began a cognitive reframing at the level of self-narrative. Second, the group dynamics themselves played a vital role. During Session 5, as group members witnessed each other's new and positive stories, the group gradually became a safe setting where participants could try out more empowering self-views. This collective attunement worked as a relational scaffold, turning the group into a validating micro-social space where emerging self-conceptions could be voiced, tested, and reinforced^[6]. Third, Session 3 centered on remembering conversation that reconnected participants with affirming relationships and past sources of support, embedding their individual narratives within wider relational and historical contexts. By anchoring revised self-views in lived relational experience, this mechanism strengthened both the authenticity and the staying power of identity change.

4.2 Effect on Psychological Capital: Immediate Enhancement and Stress Buffering

The results showed narrative group counseling had a certain immediate improvement in psychological capital. The gains observed in the experimental group was significantly more than those in the control group. At follow-up, the psychological capital in the experimental group dropped slightly, while the control group showed a decreasing trend. This pattern implied a possible stress-buffering role of the intervention.

Narrative therapy has been proven to have two advantages. It reduces negative emotions such as anxiety and depression and simultaneously promotes positive psychological resources. These effects have been confirmed not only among adolescents but also among patients with severe psychological diseases^{[19][20]} and the intervention effects remain relatively stable over time^[21]. This study brought both aspect together: mitigating negative experiences during stressful times and enhancing positive psychological capital concurrently.

A further analysis of the changes in psychological capital during the follow-up period supports the stress-buffering hypothesis. The follow-up assessment was carried out immediately after final exams when academic stress may naturally lead to a reduction in psychological capital. Consistent with this, Hua et al. found a significant negative correlation between psychological stress and psychological capital in college students^[22]. The follow-up results indicated that the psychological capital of the control group fell by 10.92 points, while that of the experimental group fell by only 3.36 points, which suggests a smaller decline. Based on narrative therapy theory, this protective effect may come from the externalization. In Session 2, participants were guided to externalize their stress as a "dragon" by using steps such as naming and impact assessment. It helped them build a cognitive framework that "the person is not the problem". When confronted with exam stress, the experimental group may have been more inclined to see it as a challenge from outside rather than a negation of self-worth. Thus the stress didn't harm to their psychological capital seriously.

4.3 Application of Narrative Therapy in Group Counseling

Externalizing, deconstructing, reconstructing, and witnessing-the pillars of narrative therapy-shaped the core of this group counseling program. In Session 2, the activity of "Naming the Dragon" reflects the complete process of externalization. Group members first named the problems that troubled themselves, and then drew "Dragon Files" to describe the scope of influence, timing and behavior patterns. The core of externalization is to separate the person from the problem, reduce self-blame and create space for positive change. In deconstruction step, the facilitators guided the participants to explore the origination of the "Dragon"- is it family expectation, school evaluations, or social norms? This helped them realize that problem are often rooted in a particular social cultural contexts rather than personal defects^[13].

Session 4 and 5 turned toward reconstructing and witnessing. In Session 4, participants searched

for "unique outcomes" - episodes that didn't match the story of their problems. For example, One participant, tended to think of herself as impatient, but recalled a moment she was genuinely patient when helped friends and recorded this as a shining trait. In Session 5, group members witnessed and responded to these traits by blessing scrolls. These therapeutic documents helped solidify positive experiences, encouraging participants bring new narratives back to daily life^[13].

As a projection tool, through the symbolic meaning of images and words, the OH Cards help members bypass psychological defenses and directly contact problem stories and exceptional events in the subconscious^[23, 24]. This program combines the OH Cards with the Heroic Journey metaphor: the Session 1 uses heroic naming to establish identity, the Session 2 uses the dragon metaphor to externalize the problem, the Session 3 uses the hero partner to symbolize the support system, the Session 4 uses the shining traits to correspond to the hero's talent, and Session 5 uses the blessing ceremony to symbolize the hero's triumph. This metaphorical framework provided members with a safe, non-threatening narrative structure that enables them to explore and reconstruct their sense of self at a symbolic level^[14].

5. Conclusion

This study confirms that narrative therapy group counseling can improve the positive psychological quality in college students. The metaphor of "Hero's Journey" metaphor coincides with the process of college students' psychological growth, and the group activities are easy to share and apply. At the same time, the study shows the fit between narrative therapy and Chinese cultural context, which is suitable for college mental health education. Educators can integrate narrative therapy into the themes such as freshman adjustment and career planning to help students build positive identity.

This study also has several limitations. First, the sample size is relative small, resulting in poor efficacy of test power. For example, the difference between the groups of psychological capital at follow-up is only marginally significant. In the future, we can expand the sample size. Second, in the process of intervention, the stress situation variables such as final exam have not been taken into account, so it is difficult to separate the net effect of intervention and the impact of situational fluctuations on psychological capital. In the follow-up study, the stress perception scale can be used as a covariate to further analyze. Third, the research mainly relies on quantitative methods and lacks qualitative materials for support. Process variables such as group atmosphere and treatment alliance are also important mechanisms for group counseling. Therefore, in the future, semi-structured interviews or narrative analysis should be added to deeply understand the specific change process of members and reveal the micro-mechanism of intervention.

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