



Narrative therapy with first-generation college students: Impacts on anxiety, depression, and retention rates.



Nicole Ruttenberg and Lisa Christensen

ABSTRACT

Over 50% of students entering higher education represent the first generation in their family to do so. These students experience unique stressors related to educational background, finances, membership in underrepresented populations, and other identities which shape their worldview. Grappling with such complexities can lead to increased likelihood of depression and anxiety, contributing to a 400% drop-out rate when compared with continuing-generation students. Narrative Therapy (NT) has shown promise in treating anxiety and depression and may be beneficial in integrating the intersectional experiences of first-generation students. Our proposed research would examine the impact of NT on depression, anxiety, and retention rates.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction:

60% of first-generation students drop out within the first year. First-Generation students face unique overlapping psychosocial and emotional challenges within institutions of higher learning which precipitate or exacerbate mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and social isolation (Frost, N. & Graham, S. et al. 2020). Case studies have shown NT to be useful in work with first-generation college students "narrative therapy increases awareness, does not pathologize behavior, promotes empowerment, and provides tools to manage problems" (Farrell, I. & Gibbons, M., 2019). Our study seeks to quantify the benefit of NT in treatment of depression and anxiety in first-generation students. Follow-up examination of institutional data will supply retention graduation rates for the sample.

PRIMARY AIM AND HYPOTHESES

Research Questions:

1. Is NT efficacious in treating depression and anxiety in First-Generation college students?
2. Does the use of NT impact retention rates compared with a control group utilizing other short-term mental health treatment models?

Hypotheses:

1. First generation college students will report decreased levels of depression and anxiety following NT.
2. NT will positively impact retention rates in comparison to the control group.

METHODS

Participants

Participants:

First-generation college students in their first or second year of university studies at a small private Christian university.

How / where recruited?:

Students who seek out counseling through the university who meet DSM criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) or Major Depression Disorder (MDD) or Adjustment Disorder with depressed or anxious features will be invited to participate.

Exclusion criteria:

Students must be in their first or second year of university studies. Participants must not have comorbid diagnoses outside of those listed for participation. Participants must not use psychotropic medications or for the duration of the study or under the influence of other impairing substances during treatment sessions. Participants must be able to complete all six sessions of treatment.

Sample Size:

20 (10 students who receive NT) 10 students receiving non-NT treatment.

Procedures

- ☐ Beck Anxiety and Depression Inventories (BAI and BDI) will be administered to both the control and NT treatment groups as part of the intake process.
- ☐ Both the control and NT treatment group participate in six sessions of their assigned therapeutic intervention.
- ☐ BDI and BAI will be administered within one week following session six.
- ☐ Review of retention rates take place two years from the end of treatment using university data.

MEASURES

Measures:

We will be comparing the mean scores of the Beck Anxiety and Depression Inventories which will be administered before session 1 and after session 6 to both the control and NT treatment group. School enrollment data will be used to compare retention or graduation rates of both the control and NT treatment groups at 2 years post-study.

RESULTS

Results:

Research Question 1: Is NT efficacious in treating depression and anxiety in First-Generation College Students?

Multiple linear regression will be used to compare the mean scores of the results of the instruments used (BDI, BAI) in the control group, and the Narrative Therapy group before treatment and after session 6.

Research Question 2: Does the use of NT impact retention rates when compared with other mental health treatments?

A chi-squared analysis will be used to compare drop-out rates of those who participated in NT vs. the control group who participated in alternative brief therapies.

Sampling procedures:

Study participants will be recruited from first-generation students who seek therapy at the student counseling center. Researchers will also utilize outreach to campus organizations committed to diversity and inclusion in support of the first-generation student population to encourage use of the student counseling center among this population.

Discussion

Social implications:

If, as we hypothesize, NT is able to positively impact retention rates among first-generation students this change is likely to result in a number of positive social impacts such as: higher graduation rates, increased representation of underrepresented populations in positions requiring advanced degrees, reduced rates of poverty; increased civic engagement, voter turnout, and democratic representation within this community.

Clinical implications:

This study aims to broaden the field of NT by extending research to an overlooked population: first-generation students. This study will explore new contexts for the application of NT by providing evidence of NT efficacy in treating depression and anxiety experienced by first-generation students. If successful, our work will provide support and direction for university-based clinicians aiming to serve this population. University counseling centers are increasingly overburdened and universities have struggled to provide adequate support for this growing population; these results will show the utility of treating clients with NT on a short-term basis.

Implications for Future Research:

The results of this study may suggest that brief NT has limited use for this population, thereby allowing researchers to focus on alternative therapies.

Positive results may suggest that the development of a standardized NT method for use with first-generation students would be a worthwhile pursuit.