

The implementation of narrative counseling for reducing final-year students' anxiety

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Abstract: *Final-year university students face the pressure of completing their theses, planning their careers, and preparing for life after graduation, leading to uncontrollable anxiety. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of applying narrative counseling in reducing anxiety in final-year students. Employing a single-subject design, the research focuses on students experiencing anxiety related to the demands of their final year. Data were collected using Beck's Anxiety Inventory to measure changes in anxiety levels before and after the counseling process. Counseling effectiveness was also assessed qualitatively based on goal achievement, the subject's reflection on the four counseling stages, and the implementation of anxiety regulation strategies. The study results indicate a reduction in anxiety levels, supported by both Beck's Anxiety Inventory scores and qualitative data obtained during the narrative counseling process.*

Keywords: Anxiety; Final Year Student; Narrative Counseling

Introduction

Anxiety is a frequently encountered condition in individuals' daily lives at various points in time. It is defined as an emotional, cognitive, or behavioral response to uncertain threats, occurring when individuals face ambiguous situations or unclear threats. Many individuals experiencing anxiety struggle to articulate their feelings (Papenfuss & Ostafin, 2021).

Although anxiety is a normal part of psychological development, it can become a serious and threatening problem if prolonged and excessive, adversely affecting daily performance and diminishing self-confidence, social relationships, and academic achievement (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). Anxiety is also perceived as generating a sense of uncontrollability focused on potential future threats, dangers, or other negative events (Riskind & Calvete, 2020). One of the significant sources of individual anxiety is during major life transitions, such as commencing or completing higher education (Keane et al., 2021).

Final-year students, typically in the early adulthood developmental stage (18-25 years old), navigate a phase characterized by self-exploration alongside uncertainties and doubts about various issues (Willoughby et al., 2021). Individuals in this early adulthood phase seek to understand themselves and determine their aspirations, often altering career plans, interpersonal relationships, and living arrangements. The multitude of changes during this period is considerable.

Conversely, issues in higher education are prevalent among young adults aspiring to pursue further studies. Anxiety and depression in this context can lead to reduced concentration, motivation, persistence, and poor academic performance (Murray & Arnett, 2018). Concerns about transitioning to higher education, along with apprehensions about the changes and uncertainties associated with graduating from college, are prominent among students (Keane et al., 2021)

Several studies have found that final-year students are uncertain or hesitant about their next steps after graduating from college, expressing doubts about their goals, job search processes, and decisions regarding further education (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; Newman-Ford, 2018; Sari et al., 2020). The pressure experienced by final-year students in their studies, thesis preparation, and post-graduation plans leads to stress and anxiety, posing a significant burden for some students. Support through campus health and well-being services or alternative methods may be necessary for these final-year students. However, limited research has focused specifically on final-year students exhibiting significant levels of anxiety (Keane et al., 2021). To address anxiety levels in final-year students, various therapies have been implemented, including *mindfulness-based art therapy* (Van Lith et al., 2021), *internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy* (Barker et al., 2018), *visiting therapy dog* (Barker et al., 2016) and *narrative therapy*.

One of the methods utilized for anxiety management is narrative therapy (Zarra-Nezhad et al., 2023). In narrative therapy, individuals provide a first-person narrative, defining themselves based on their memories of childhood, current life, roles in various social and personal settings, and their relational life with others (O'Connor, 2020). Narrative therapy proves effective in addressing individuals experiencing significant pessimism, self-doubt, anger, negligence, apathy, restlessness, anxiety, and various depressive symptoms, such as anxiety disorders, communication disorders, intellectual disabilities, depression, among others (Ghavibazou et al., 2022).

In narrative therapy, clients typically present their stories or narratives to the counselor. Clients grapple with self-narratives that may hinder decision-making (Carter et al., 2020). As clients express their opinions through their narratives, they tend to reflect on what they already know and attempt to find answers to their long-standing questions. Through this process, new perspectives emerge, enabling clients to reshape their narrative identity. Narrative therapy facilitates individual development in understanding one's identity and recognizing the dominant narrative or story within oneself that shapes personal identity (White & White, 2007). The primary goal of narrative therapy is to focus on inefficient beliefs, externalize and ignore problems, consider issues from different perspectives resulting in different interpretations, and rewrite the life story of individuals experiencing high levels of anxiety (Dallos, 2023).

A preliminary study conducted on a subject with the initial "R" indicates that R experiences anxiety in composing the thesis as the final assignment of her study and in post-graduate life. R expresses concerns about her career prospects after completing university, feeling anxious if unable to meet familial expectations regarding anticipated employment. The sources of R's anxiety appear predominantly external to herself, often disrupting her plans or self-expectations. The imbalance in these expectations leads R to frequently experience anxiety when confronted with sudden external challenges. Consequently, to address R's anxiety issues, the researcher implements an intervention in the form of counseling with a narrative therapy approach. Narrative counseling provided to R utilizes the Statement of Position Map proposed by White & White, (2007), involving four stages in externalizing problems within narrative therapy: (1) naming the problem; (2) mapping the effects; (3) evaluating the effects; and (4) values when thinking about effects.

Research on individuals with Generalized Anxiety Disorder demonstrates a significant reduction in anxiety levels following narrative therapy intervention. In Indonesia, studies on the application of counseling with a narrative therapy approach specifically targeting final-year students with high levels of anxiety remain limited, especially in individual applications (Permatasari & Primana, 2023). Meanwhile, narrative therapy can assist final-year students in understanding themselves, providing new perspectives on issues causing their anxiety. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the effectiveness of narrative therapy in reducing anxiety among final-year students.

Method

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a single-subject design (pre-test post-test). The single-subject design allows the researcher to assess the effectiveness of an intervention program provided to an individual with specific conditions. The research's effectiveness is gauged by differences in attitude or behavior scores between pre- and post-intervention conditions. Anxiety levels at the baseline were compared with anxiety levels after the intervention.

The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling. The study focused on the participant "R," a final-year female student, recruited based on psychological examinations indicating anxiety in thesis preparation. R's anxiety manifested when facing challenges such as difficult communication with the thesis advisor, lack of directive guidance, limited opportunities for direct guidance, and feedback from the advisor that often did not align with expectations. Additionally, R tended to avoid interactions with others due to anxiety about others' thesis progress.

The intervention utilized externalization strategies within narrative therapy. The researcher employed the Statement of Position Map worksheet, consisting of four stages for externalizing conversations during counseling (White & White, 2007). The client takes position and map her problems. In the first stage, R completed a pre-test questionnaire to assess baseline anxiety levels. Before engaging in the treatment, she filled the statement of position map worksheet. It included four stages of problem representation with trigger questions aligned with the goals of each stage (see Table 1). Stages 1 and 2 were conducted during the first session.

Table 1. Statement of Position Map Worksheet

Stage	Objectives
Naming the Problem	The client reflects on the characteristics and naming or labeling of the issue using an experience-near approach.
Mapping the Effects	The client maps the impact of the problem and can separate the problem from themselves by associating it with the felt impacts.
Evaluating the Effects	The client evaluates the impact of their problem, assisting in gradually shifting their perspective from the problem and its manifested impacts. This position separates the client from her problem.
Values When Thinking About Effects	The client contemplates why the problem disturbs her and considers values violated or obstructed by the issue. In this stage, the client engages in reauthoring, i.e., reinterpreting her narrative with a new, more positive meaning and elucidating her position in addressing the current issue.

Stage 3 was conducted during the second meeting. In this stage, the researcher conducted counseling to discuss the worksheet previously filled out by R in the first meeting. Subsequently, the researcher invited R to contemplate strategies for regulating her anxiety and assigned tasks for implementing these strategies in daily life. Stage 3 concluded with R filling out an evaluation questionnaire regarding her reactions to the counseling process. Stage 4 serves as a follow-up stage, which was conducted two weeks after the third counseling session. In this stage, R provided updates on the issues faced and the strategies used to regulate her anxiety. R was then asked to reflect on whether the initial goals set at the beginning of the meetings were achieved and to provide an overall insight into the counseling sessions. This stage concluded with R completing a post-test questionnaire to assess her anxiety level after the intervention.

To examine the effectiveness of the intervention, the researcher employed two levels of measurement, reaction evaluation, and behavioral evaluation. Reaction evaluation was measured by the client's assessment of the counseling process, including instructions, tools, activities during counseling, and their relevance to the client's needs. Meanwhile, behavioral evaluation, to measure the intervention's effectiveness based on the reduction in anxiety levels, utilized Beck's Anxiety Inventory (BAI). The BAI, adapted for the Indonesian context (Syarlita, 2020), measured anxiety levels based on individual physical symptoms experienced in the past week. BAI was administered before and after the intervention.

Data analysis involved a visual review of data graphs at baseline and post-intervention conditions. The focus was on changes at the level, specifically the reduction in BAI scores between baseline and post-intervention conditions. R's reflections on counseling goal attainment, problem positioning, and mapping during the counseling process, as well as the implementation of anxiety regulation strategies mentioned by R, provided qualitative information regarding the effectiveness of narrative counseling in helping the client reduce anxiety.

Result and Discussion

Based on the evaluation of reactions to the intervention sessions, it can be concluded that R exhibited a positive response to the narrative counseling conducted in this study. The average score for the session implementation assessment was 4.6 (out of a total of 5 points). Table 2 presents the results of the reaction evaluation scores obtained.

Table 2. Reaction Evaluation Result

Item	Score	Description
The implementation went well	5	Strongly Agree
Questions or instructions from the counselor were easy to understand	4	Agree
Activities within the intervention session were easy to understand and follow	5	Strongly Agree
The counseling program provided was beneficial to me	5	Strongly Agree
I can apply this counseling program in my daily life	4	Agree

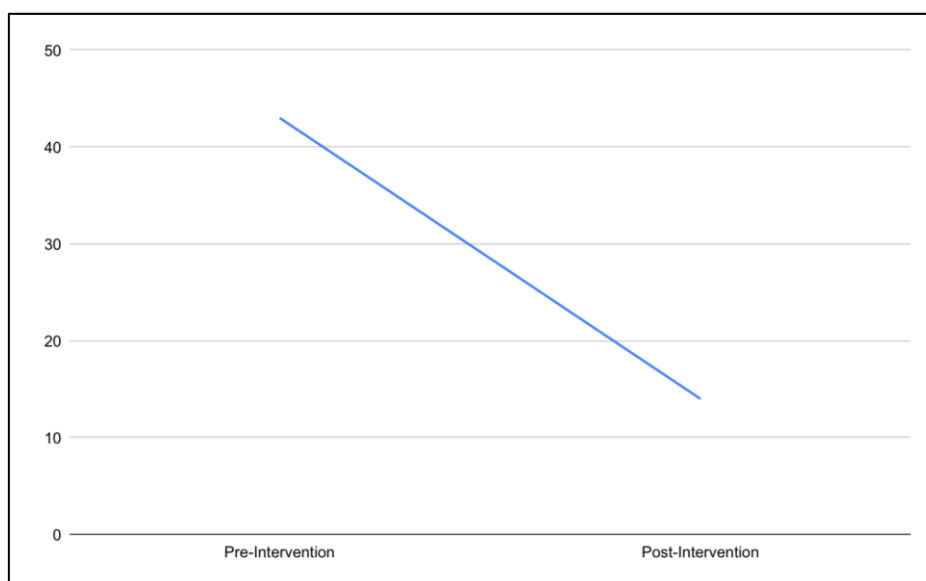


Figure 1 Beck's Anxiety Inventory Score Changes

Figure 2 shows a decrease in anxiety levels between the pre-intervention ($M=2.04$) and post-narrative counseling intervention ($M=0.67$). Comparing the total scores reveals a reduction of 29 points between before and after the intervention. Prior to the intervention (pre-test), R's anxiety was classified as severe (score range 36-63), while after the intervention (post-test), R's anxiety fell into the mild category (score range 0-21). This indicates that the narrative counseling intervention effectively reduced R's anxiety levels between the pre- and post-intervention periods. Based on the follow-up session interview, R stated that she experiences minimal anxiety frequency. When triggers causing anxiety arise, R can remain calm and does not immediately exhibit physical reactions associated with her anxiety. R can think more positively. Additionally, R mentioned that her GERD almost did not occur in the last two weeks post-intervention.

In addition to examining BAI score changes, the intervention also considers R's interpretations provided during counseling sessions. The intervention can be deemed effective when it achieves counseling goals, how the client positions and maps the problem during the counseling process, and the effectiveness of implementing anxiety regulation strategies mentioned by the client during counseling. R's counseling goals set at the beginning of the sessions were to understand herself better and gain insight into facing problems. R aimed to control or regulate herself when a problem suddenly arises in her life (controlling anxiety from external factors). The achievement of these counseling goals is considered successful, although R has not felt it 100% due to the short time between the last counseling session and the follow-up interview. R stated that she has already moved towards the intended goals, assisting in handling problems that may arise from external factors. Moreover, she can understand herself better and question her true goals. R is also calmer in facing problems stemming from external factors.

R's reflection interpretation during the counseling process also indicate a positive result. In the "Naming the Problem" stage, R effectively identified the issue she was facing, which was anxiety about post-college life. R described her problem using an experience-near approach, articulating it from her perspective. During the "Mapping the Effects" stage, R successfully mapped the impacts of the problem and separated it from herself. She acknowledged that her anxiety stemmed from external factors beyond her control. In the "Evaluating the Effects" stage, R evaluated the impact of her anxiety, recognizing positive impacts on her life and gaining new experiences applicable to similar conditions or situations. Moving to the "Values When Thinking About Effects" stage, R gained insight into how her anxiety conflicted with her values. Although she accepted that the problem causing her anxiety would persist in her life, she tried to uphold her values despite recurring issues. In terms of implementing anxiety regulation strategies, R aimed to stay calm, be wise, and think rationally when facing anxiety triggers. She planned to communicate her problems to those close to her and, when anxious, engage in evening walks—a strategy she found effective in regulating her anxiety. R demonstrated a positive mindset when confronting anxiety-inducing situations and became more open about communicating her issues with those close to her.

The study revealed a reduction in anxiety scores using the BAI measurement tool. R's anxiety level possibly decreased during narrative counseling, partly due to her graduation during the counseling sessions. The anxiety discussed in this narrative counseling focused on the root causes of R's perceived anxiety. Even after graduation, R continued to experience anxiety related to career planning and her future, aligning with Keane et al., (2021) findings that final-year students feel unsupported by their institutions in preparing for future employment. The decrease in R's anxiety levels was influenced by changes in R's thought patterns and beliefs during counseling. Narrative counseling aided R in reducing negative beliefs, allowing her to craft a new narrative from these beliefs. The narrative counseling process helped R identify positive and negative emotions, contributing to a reduction in her

anxiety levels (Kurth, 2018). This study aligns with Ghorbani and Raeisi's (2020) findings that narrative therapy enables students to identify positive and negative emotions, reducing anxiety. Abbasi et al. (2020) research on individuals with Generalized Anxiety Disorder also demonstrated a decrease in anxiety levels through narrative therapy implementation. Using a single-subject research design, this study provides a deeper understanding of the subject's anxiety during counseling. It addresses the limitation of (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020) study, suggesting a focus on qualitative data from the narrative counseling process.

The study findings indicate that overall, narrative counseling effectively reduced the subject's anxiety levels. The subject's counseling goal was to address anxiety arising from sudden, externally driven problems. Within the narrative counseling framework, the subject's narratives were reflected upon and interpreted, providing self-understanding. R could reflect on and reinterpret the presented problems from a different perspective. Throughout counseling, R gained new insights and construed her experiences in dealing with anxiety, shaping her current self. R found meaning in her anxiety experiences, perceiving them as positively impacting her personal development in problem-solving. These results align with the concept of narrative therapy, where one's life is shaped by the narratives they hold about their experiences, influencing their life.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The narrative counseling intervention with R yielded positive results based on reaction and behavior evaluations. R perceived the intervention as beneficial and applicable to her life, considering the counseling process smooth and helpful in self-understanding, particularly in overcoming anxiety due to problems. Beck's Anxiety Inventory measurements demonstrated a 29-point reduction in anxiety levels before and after narrative counseling. Thus, the intervention effectively reduced R's anxiety. R felt this reduction because she focused on thinking more positively about emerging problems, enabling her to respond more calmly. R became better at self-regulation when confronted with anxiety-inducing situations.

The implications of this research can benefit psychologists and educators, providing insights into assisting final-year students experiencing anxiety related to common issues at this academic stage. This study can serve as a foundation for practitioners to develop narrative therapy-based counseling applications for students facing high levels of anxiety. To enhance intervention program quality, future researchers can be more flexible in formulating questions for inclusion in the Statement of Position Map. Additionally, researchers can explore alternative narrative therapy-based counseling strategies beyond the Statement of Position Map, tailored to the individual's issues. Creativity in counseling execution, such as incorporating diaries or visual aids like drawings, could be explored beyond the conventional use of extensive written worksheets.

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