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The idea of the Self in young adults with psychological difficulties and uncertainty in the psychosocial transition phase to the university context: a Self-Characterization Analysis in a Counselling workshop

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Abstract

The entry of students into the university world coincides with what, in the literature, is called "psycho-social transitions", described not rarely, in the psychological field, as stressful and uncertain events, to the point of making the person more psychologically vulnerable. To evaluate the transition process, we used the mixed quantitative–qualitative method in the pre/post-intervention modalities of a counseling workshop in which six students (mean age=22.83, SD=1.47) who requested psychological support from the University Counselling Centre participated. The Symptom Check-List-90-R and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were used to assess the psychopathological framework, while self-characterization was used to investigate the constructs of the self. In summary, the results indicate a significant improvement in the psychopathological symptoms and self-esteem of most subjects after the intervention, as evidenced by the decrease in scores on the three global indices assessed by the SCL-90 R (Global Severity Index—GSI; Positive Symptom Distress Index—PSDI; Positive Symptom Total—PST) and the increased scores in the Rosenberg test. Empowering one's interpersonal resources means being able to adopt a new perspective by nurturing a greater sense of self-efficacy, from "I am as I think others see me" to "I am in relation to my feelings, others, my history, my projects", which highlights a different way of constructing the "Self-Image".

Keywords: University students, self-evaluation, stress, young, middle age adult

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Introduction

Psychosocial transitions

The individual's life path is defined by the interceding of developmental trajectories that require the resolution of many contextually and culturally situated tasks (Havinghurst, 1952; Gage et al., 2021).

Along this path, it is possible to observe moments of "passage", "rites de passage" (Van Gennep, 1909), or "social locomotions" (Lewin, 1951), which often coincide with the passage from one state of life to another (for example, becoming a parent, entering the world of work, or even, as we intend to examine, attending university).

The entry of students into the university world coincides with what is called "psycho-social transitions" (Iannaccone, 2004) in the literature, described not rarely, in the psychological field, as stressful events, to the point of making the person more psychologically vulnerable (Savarese et al., 2019b).

This "transition" leads back to the image of a passage from one place to another: it is a journey in which the individual, starting from a context (physical and/or internalized), arrives at another, similar or different from the previous one. The traveler wears lenses—cultural models (Anolli, 2011; Mantovani, 1998)—with which they look at and interpret the new landscape, and they carry a backpack with *tools*, such as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral categories, which are socially built and inherent in these models, with which they will have to face the path as well as their new reality.

Zittoun et al. (2003; 2004; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2014) ontogenetically define "transition" as a "mobile" period that allows the exploration of possible paths and personal changes through a trial-and-error phase. This transition is activated by a *problem/rupture,* originating, in turn, from contact with a "disturbing" or unfamiliar object, such as reading a book, starting a new job, encountering a different culture, or even entering a new educational context. Following this rupture, a process of elaboration is activated, linked to the construction of meaning, and aimed at a new and sustainable adaptation process between the person and their current environment, in which rebalancing processes, restoring one's sense of continuity and integrity, are activated. Ruptures, therefore, require a process of repositioning; in other words, they can solicit new acquisitions, correspondences, and personal redefinitions.

What the subject perceives is a phase of uncertainty (Simao, 2005) generated by the stranger, which can be experienced as paralyzing or stimulating; but, in most cases, one's previous understanding is questioned, and the need to explore new categories of understanding is recalled (Zittoun et al., 2003). The systemic–relational perspective (Carter and Goldrick, 1980) identifies normative events (e.g., the transition from single to couple and then, to the parental couple, etc.) or para-normative (bereavement of a family member or other unexpected life-cycle events) triggers for the review of one's intrapsychic and interpersonal identity aspects.

The process leading to change is articulated according to the dynamics of "*internalization*" (Zittoun, 2014) as a place and process in which an experience encountered in the interpersonal world interacts with intrapsychic meanings which are, in turn, the result of one's relationship with the context.

The outcome of this transition depends on the type of stimulus: transitions that occur by *rupture* are, according to Zittoun, those which, in the long term, present themselves as being most profitable as they bring about new ideas and ways of acting; meanwhile, in the case of *transitive changes*, new stimuli participate in the system rules and do not produce any change.

A transitional situation is, therefore, a critical experience, which is not negative, but a temporary phase of disorientation and psychological disorganization, characterized by the subject's difficulty in controlling the emotional variables related to the impact of the "new". As an experience of change, it can be seen as a potential opportunity for development, emancipation, and the reconstruction of a new and more satisfying state of psychological equilibrium (Cicognani and Pirini, 2007; Gomes et al., 2017; Martsin et al., 2016; Mancini and Tonarelli, 2013; Savarese et al., 2014; 2019a), which generally involves a redefinition of the self through a readjustment of old and new patterns of the self and the world (Iannaccone et al., 2005). However, this transition does not take place in a neutral context: the adoption of a psychosocial perspective in the study of transitions allows for the integration of contextual development factors as decidedly constitutive elements and not only as "modulators of the dynamics of change" (Perret-Clermont and Iannaccone, 2005). In psychological development, each transition necessarily constitutes a system of activities that, although observable at the individual level, finds its fundamental explanation in the social and cultural dimensions.

The transition from the School to the University context

The formative experience in the individual's life path is a constantly evolving process, characterized by a plurality of significant events which contribute to determining its trend. The transition to university is perfectly part of a psychosocial transition within an educational/training context, an event that introduces significant changes in the way in which an individual relates to the environment and requires new and more adequate responses to the changed conditions of existence (Gibson et al., 2019; Manzi et al, 2010; Ravenna et al., 1999).

Entering university puts the student in front of a series of transformations that can be experienced both as personal growth opportunities and moments of adaptation crisis (Sestito et al., 2011). Indeed, potential feelings of discomfort and psychological crises can emerge concerning the need to reorganize one's life experience. If, on the one hand, there is a dimension closely linked to the construction of the professional role, on the other hand, the transition from the condition of teenager to a more mature condition of a student and young adult is highlighted. In terms of identity, the young university student lives a dynamic process of transition and progressive and adaptive redefinition of the self (Cesaro, ed., 2010).

In this phase of change, the student is called to reorganize their social role; social relationships are redefined (with family, peers, and formative figures), and sometimes, alongside them, the physical contexts of life and one's identity within these (Cassidy and Trew, 2004; Zittoun, 2008; Oyserman

and Destin, 2010). Concerning this last aspect, it seems that identity and socio-demographic characteristics play an important role in the approach to transition (Berzonsky and Kuk, 2000) and adaptation to the context (Sanagavarapu and Abram, 2020).

The students suddenly find themselves catapulted into a new condition of life and must face an environment with characteristics different from those experienced previously: an environment no longer protected, such as those of the family or compulsory school. They must take on new responsibilities and experiment with new ways of managing the time organization of everyday life, from their study methods to their relationships with peers and teachers and from lesson frequency to leisure activities. The student is also called to gain real knowledge of the curricula and disciplinary contents that they partly thought they already knew based on previous training experience and that sometimes appear new or distant from the expectations built (Jackson et al, 2006). Very often students are confronted with an "*idea of* student" and "*themselves as university students*" with the reality of their "*being a student now*": for example, imagining that they are competent in scientific disciplines, as experienced during their higher studies, and, instead, failing precisely in the study and exam performance in these disciplines (Jones, 2018).

Facing critical situations related to overcoming these various development tasks requires the growth of adequate skills on the cognitive, emotional–affective, and strategic–behavioral levels (Savarese et al, 2016), as well as the ability to support the comparison with peers who face, perhaps with different tools and strategies, the same situation (Cesaro, ed., 2010).

Coping can become a source of stress and sometime trigger identity disorders (Gupta et al. 2008): for example, "*I imagined being brought to the disciplines of this degree course and feeling that this is perhaps no longer my professional path*".

These challenges take place in a delicate period of life characterized by a multitude of unknowns, during which the full maturity required to serenely face their scope has not yet been reached.

Certainly, the stress intensity level and the ability to positively cope with a certain transition situation vary from subject to subject, depending on personal factors and one's social supports (Jackson et al, 2006; Tao et al., 2000; Savarese et al., 2019a). It can become evolutionary, however, if the person can leave the position they previously occupied and, based on their skills and knowledge, generate ways of thinking and acting that help them re-establish a new regularity through uncertainty.

The ability to face and manage a critical situation calls into question both an emotional component, linked to subjective experience, and a cognitive one, linked to the adequacy of the interpretative schemes available to the subject to understand an unexpected situation, or one different to those experienced up until that moment.

The opportunity for growth, strongly spurred by the request for change in this period, is expressed and developed through the implementation of more autonomous behaviors compared to previous life stages, a greater capacity for self-organization, and the search for a new psychophysical balance connected to lifestyle and, more generally, well-being, which can be largely related to one's ability to adapt to the social context as it is more broadly understood, a context full of representations in which attributions of meaning are constructed and shared.

Through numerous studies, it has been possible to document how environmental conditions exert a significant influence on people's balance and well-being states and their individual and social behaviors. Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Wilson (1987) have been able to analyze and document the central role of social context's structural and cultural dimensions to understand many problems related to human development.

Having the opportunity to live in a positive and self-fulfilling environment encourages involvement in stimulating study/training activities, playing certain social roles, building rewarding friendships, and actively living in one's neighborhood. These opportunities are indicated as variables that have a strong protective influence on people's well-being and help them achieve their goals.

The tasks that the student must face change over time and are influenced by culture, personal and social needs, and life expectancy. For example, for a young student, academic success can be considered an important developmental task (Cantor and Harlow, 1994). It is, therefore, important in the evaluation of well-being to take into strong consideration the inevitable changes in one's life-course, purposes, and satisfaction of personal needs and in the presence of critical events that force the individual to redefine themselves and implement new adaptive strategies, functional to the restoration of homeostasis and the achievement of a new balance in terms of health.

The academic success of students, for example, often corresponds to their adaptive ability to face obstacles and pressing assessments, providing progressive evidence of their abilities and perseverance (years of enrolment, continuity of studies and performance, success in courses in terms of average academic grades) (Gupta et al., 2008). However, the success of this academic path is also linked to emotional–affective factors, such as a sense of self-efficacy and well-being, expressed in terms of the recognition of one's resources and the integration within one's reference context. The possibility of actively participating in social life, as well as being part of the context, becomes a privileged tool for achieving one's goals, not only in terms of academic success but also in terms of better levels of self-management and well-being.

Therefore, in the first phase of university entry and in the subsequent periods, the student is called to carry out a *cultural integration* between their systems of meaning and the new university codes to build a sense of their educational path (Iannaccone et al., 2003) and of themselves within that context. This happens through processes that can be defined as "*integration dynamics*" (Iannaccone et al., 2005), within which both the processes of construction and non-construction *of the self* are highlighted *(*Moscardino and Axia, 2001; Smorti, 2003), as well as the function of one's *network of social relations*. The encounter with the training setting requires one to not only acquire new knowledge and skills but also a system of practices to build their own professional function.

Access to university academic life, on the one hand, stimulates one's adaptation to a new social environment and, on the other, a process of identity repositioning, cultural

transfer, and construction of new meanings (Zittoun, 2007; Gomes et al., 2017).

Coulon (1997) explains how dropouts are often the result of a lack of synthesis between the demands of university and a student's ability to adapt and accommodate, use, and assimilate its new codes, different resources, and routines, respectively.

In summary, the encounter with the university educational context requires, on the one hand, the implementation of strategies aimed at finding *points of anchorage and meaning* (Bruner, 1990; 1996) and, on the other hand, the activation and functions of one's network of social relationships, fundamental elements in the determination of the educational experience's adaptive outcomes (Francescato et al., 2002), as well as those of inter-contextual movements.

In this phase of change, the young adult is called to reorganize their social role and, more generally, themselves, through a readjustment of old and new patterns of themselves and the world. Therefore, they are asked to face critical situations related to the overcoming of different development tasks, such as the modification of social relations (with peers, teachers, and family), the management of daily life, the making of new space–time scans (for example, a change of city), and the readaptation to life and study management within the university, the resolution of which generates strong levels of stress and anxiety (Savarese et al., 2019a, 2019b) which affect university performance and require appropriate cognitive, emotional–affective, strategic–behavioral, and relational skills (Savarese et al., 2016).

According to Kirtzow (2003), students seem unprepared to handle complicated stressors during their college life. This has increased the risk of psychosocial and mental disorders that include impaired social functioning and relapses in learning (Hamdan-Mansour et al., 2009). Resilience refers to a person's ability to resist stress, and evidence suggests that resilient people have better mental health. Resilience also provides individuals with all the required qualities to successfully cope with new life challenges and difficulties (Cuomo et al., 2008). While resilience indicates positive mental health, the individual's mental health is also affected by other components, such as perceived social support and depressive symptoms.

Aim and hypothesis of this study

Our study aims to describe the self-concept of young adults with psychological difficulties during the psychosocial transition phase to university, through data collection with the self-characterization (Kelly, 1955), administered before and after a counseling workshop intervention. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

a) Individual variations in their self-concept could be influenced by the nature of their psychological difficulties, as well as their life experiences and transition to university. Young adults with difficulties have greater self-assessment and self-acceptance challenges than those without difficulties. This could be reflected in a greater discrepancy between the desired and perceived self-concept.

b) Thematic representations of the self as recurring themes or patterns might emerge in the way in which participants describe and represent themselves. For example, a theme

of self-criticism or self-compassion might emerge in their self-narratives.

c) It might emerge that participants identify internal and external personal resources that influence their self-concept and psychological well-being during their transition to university. This could include a change in the scores of any anxiety–depressive symptoms investigated.

Methodology

Participants

In this paper, we present six cases of students (two males, four females; mean age= 22.83, SD= 1.47) who requested psychological support at the University Counselling Center and followed a counseling workshop.

For inclusion in this study, students had to have taken part in workshop meetings, concluded their counseling sessions, or be awaiting a follow-up interview (inclusion criteria).

The reason for choosing this small group was the assumption that working on autobiographical themes requires a certain degree of personalization and individual attention. With a smaller number of participants, trainers could offer more focused and personalized support to each participant, allowing them to deepen and explore their experiences in more detail.

Furthermore, discussing autobiographical themes can be a very intimate and vulnerable experience for many participants. A smaller group can create a safer and more confidential environment in which participants feel more comfortable sharing personal and sensitive experiences.

The above is particularly important in workshops that focus on exploring and enhancing psychological resources, as they require a deeper level of personal reflection and understanding.

This study was conducted in line with the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) and the recommendations of the "Associazione Italiana di Psicologia" (AIP) and approved by the local Ethics Committee (number 01/2021).

Structure of the workshop

The project "Relationships, emotions and Self-efficacy: a workshop to overcome one's discomfort" is proposed as a pathway to self-knowledge and self-understanding as the re-appropriation of one's history, through the simple and essential tool of narration, which takes place in the respectful and welcoming context of the group.

The workshop is structured in five thematic modules, each of which consists of several meetings, twice a week, each lasting 3 hours.

MODULE 1—SELF-PORTRAIT. Systematic self-telling leads to a state of well-being by allowing the subject to rethink what has been experienced up to that moment as if one were to become a spectator of their life. In this way, one learns by learning from oneself, with the acceptance and understanding of their ego.

MODULE 2—LIFE WAVES, EMOTIONS. Strengthening emotional competence is very important, as an individual can recognize one's own emotions and those of others, be able to

communicate them through the expressions and language of one's own culture and regulate them in a context-appropriate manner to derive a sense of efficacy in relationships.

MODULE 3—OTHERS AND I: INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS. Working on interpersonal relationships is crucial in many aspects of life and can improve emotional well-being. Social support and empathy can help manage stress and overcome personal challenges. Interacting with others exposes one to different points of view and provides opportunities for personal growth. Interpersonal relationships help one develop skills such as active listening, conflict management, and negotiation.

MODULE 4—SELF-DISCOVERING UNIQUENESS: SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-EFFICACY. Working on the enhancement of self-esteem and self-efficacy can have a significant impact on a person's overall quality of life, influencing the way in which one faces challenges, interacts with others, and pursues personal and professional success.

MODULE 5—SURVIVING CHANGE! Each critical event characterizes a phase in an individual's life cycle, and its resolution allows the transition to the next stage. In general, each critical event confronts the individual with developmental tasks concerning the renegotiation of their role and function and the reorganization of relationships.

In this way, it is possible to achieve the following: a) foster the acquisition of relational skills to decode one's discomfort; b) increase reflective and metacognitive attitudes by creating moments of confrontation of the experiences of those who experience situations of discomfort; and c) offer users a space for self-reflection to strengthen their self-esteem and redesign their lives in light of new knowledge and experiences.

To evaluate the effectiveness of our workshop, qualitative and quantitative evaluation tools were used pre- and post-intervention.

Tools

Qualitative method: in the pre–post workshop path, the Self-characterization (Kelly, 1955; Armezzani & Chiari, 2014) was administered. Self-characterization, also known as character sketch, is a technique within Personal Construct Therapy that aims primarily to tap directly into a client's construction system, that is, how the client understands and interprets themselves. It is a brief written exercise asking the client to write about themselves in a way that may be utilized at some time during therapy (PsycInfo Database Record APA, 2020).

Quantitative method: Both the a) Symptom Check-List-90-R (SCL-90 R; Derogatis et al., 1977) and the b) Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) were administered in the pre- and post-intervention phases of the counseling workshop for the analysis of the psychological state of the participating students.

a) The SCL-90 R is a self-report instrument widely used in clinical and research settings for assessing the severity of symptoms experienced by the subject during the week before administration. The instrument can also be used as an outcome measure in treatment pathways. This self-report is divided into the following sections:

- Three global indices: the Global Severity Index (GSI), a global indicator of the intensity and depth of the psychic distress reported by the subject; the Positive Symptom Total (PST), an index representing the number of symptoms reported by the subject; and the Positive Symptom Distress Index (PSDI), the index of the subject's response style, providing information regarding whether this has accentuated or alleviated symptomatic distress.

- Nine symptom scales: somatization (SOM) reflects the discomfort arising from the perception of bodily dysfunction; obsessiveness–compulsivity (O-C) includes symptoms that are commonly identified with the clinical syndrome of the same name; interpersonal hypersensitivity (I-S) focuses on feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, arising from comparison with other people; depression (DEP), the symptoms of this scale cover the clinical manifestations of depression; anxiety (ANX), includes general signs of anxiety, such as nervousness, tension, and trembling, as well as panic attacks and feelings of dread; hostility (HOS) reflects thoughts, feelings, or actions characteristic of anger, which cover all modes of expression and manifestation such as aggression, irritability, and resentment; phobic anxiety (PHOB) refers to a persistent fear response—to a specific person, place, object, or situation—that is recognized as irrational and disproportionate to the stimulus and leads to avoidance or escape behaviors; paranoid ideation (PAR) investigates characteristic manifestations of paranoid thinking; and psychoticism (PSY) includes items indicative of a lifestyle involving withdrawal and isolation as well as first-order symptoms of schizophrenia. The degree of internal consistency, calculated on the total scores of the subscales of the SCL-90, indicates that α corresponds to 0.93, showing excellent test reliability.

As indicated by Derogatis et al. (1977), T scores of >50 points indicate critical levels of clinical psychopathology.

b) The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, created in 1965, is now one of the most widely used scales worldwide for assessing a person's self-esteem. Like all self-assessment scales, it provides a rough answer that helps the person filling it out to understand their level of self-esteem and whether it is appropriate to intervene if their self-esteem is low. The scale generally has a high reliability: the test–retest correlations are typically in the range of .82 to .88, and Cronbach's alpha for the various samples ranges from 0 to 30. Scores between 15 and 25 are in the normal range; and scores below 15 indicate low self-esteem.

Data analysis

Qualitative method: The whole corpus of autobiographies was analyzed through an automatic procedure for content analysis (ACASM), performed by the T-Lab Plus 2022 software (Lancia, 2020). Through this procedure, it was possible to map the main dimensions of meanings underlying the content set. This method is based on the general assumption that meanings are formed in terms of lexical variability. Accordingly, it aims to detect how words combine (i.e., co-occur) within utterances, regardless of sentence referentiality (Lebart, 1998).

For the ACASM analysis, specific steps were carried out: a) preparation of the data corpus; b) text pre-processing operations, such as the removal of stop words, lemmatization, or stemmatization, to simplify the analysis; c) definition of the units of analysis; d) content categorization; e) frequency

analysis to identify the distribution of keywords in the text; f) co-occurrence analysis of words or concepts to identify relationships or patterns; and g) context analysis.

Quantitative method: The quantitative descriptive analysis of the scores provided an overview of the data, allowing us to understand trends in the scores in the pre-and post-phases obtained with the SCL-90 R and Rosenberg tests. Specifically, for the SCL-90 R, the global indices (GSI—Global Severity Index; PSDI—Positive Symptom Distress Index; and PST—Positive Symptom Total) were analyzed in depth.

Results

The psychological assets of the participants

In this section, we will observe the scores for the different participants (SG1, SG2, SG3, SG4, SG5, SG6) before and after the workshop, in the three global indices of the SCL-90 R: the GSI (Global Severity Index), the PSDI (Positive Symptom Distress Index), and the PST (Positive Symptom Total).

The trend in the scores for the three indices (GSI, PSDI, and PST) before (pre) and after (post) was as follows:

- Global Severity Index (GSI, see Figure 1): in general, the pre-scores were higher than the post-scores for all the subjects, and, for most, they exceeded the expected clinical cut-off (>50), indicating an improvement in symptoms after the intervention. The post-scores ranged from 49 to 60, while the pre-scores ranged from 60 to 75.

Fig. 1. Global Severity Index (GSI) pre/post-intervention of counseling workshop through SCL-90 (dotted line [---] indicates SCL-90 R clinical cut-off >50.)
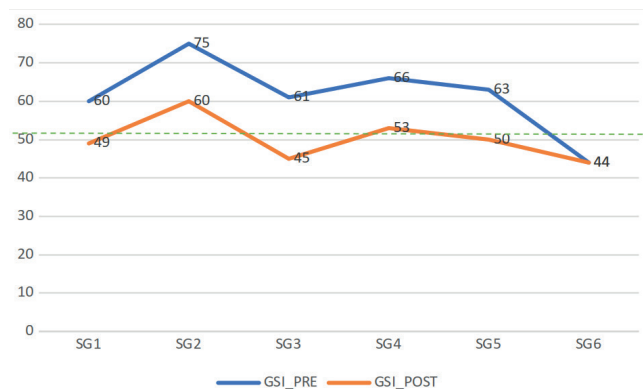
- Positive Symptom Distress Index (PSDI, see Figure 2): also, for the PSDI, an improvement in the post scores over the pre scores was observed for most subjects. The post scores ranged from 53 to 66, while the pre scores ranged from 64 to 72, exceeding the clinical cut-off of >50 points at this stage.

- Positive Symptom Total (PST, see Figure 3): a similar trend to the other indices was observed, with the post scores generally being lower than the pre scores. The post scores ranged from 39 to 51, while the pre scores ranged from 41 to 75. Again, the trend suggested an overall reduction in the psychopathological symptoms after the intervention and an exceedance of the clinical cut-off (>50) in the pre-intervention phase.

Fig. 2. Positive Symptom Distress Index (PSDI) pre/post-intervention of counseling workshop through SCL-90 (dotted line [---] indicates SCL-90 R clinical cut-off >50.)
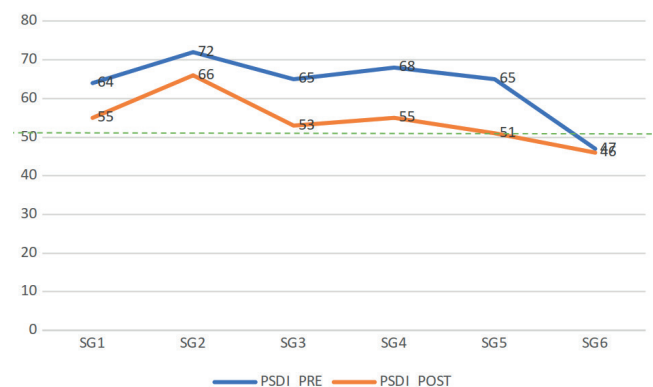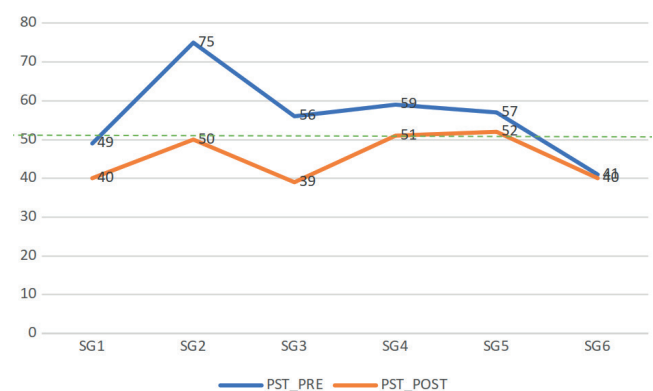

Fig. 3. Positive Symptom Total (PST) pre/post-intervention of counseling workshop through SCL-90 (dotted line [---] indicates SCL-90 R clinical cut-off >50.)

Regarding the dimension of self-esteem, in general, an increase in the post scores compared to the pre scores was observed for all the subjects on the Rosenberg test (see Figure 4). Some participants showed more significant increases than others, indicating a differential response to the workshop. Furthermore, whereas, in the pre phase, the scores were below the cut-off (<15), indicating a low level of self-esteem, in the post phase, the scores exceeded the cut-off.

In summary, these results indicate a significant improvement in psychopathological symptoms and self-esteem for most

Fig. 4. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale pre/post-intervention of counseling workshop (dotted line [---] Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale cut-off <15.)
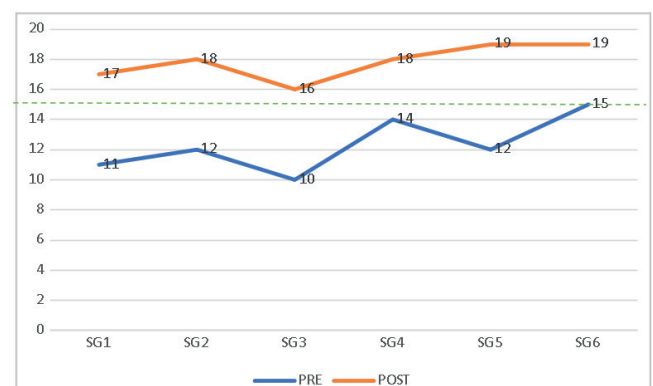
subjects after the intervention, as evidenced by the decrease in scores for all three indices assessed by SCL-90 R and the increased scores for the Rosenberg test.

Self-representation through Self-characterization

The qualitative analysis of the data showed the following (see Figure 5):

a) FACTOR 1-X AXIS Self-Representation: Self as role (X+) vs. Self in relation (X-).

In the positive polarity (X+), we found lemmas that recalled the need and desire to question and experiment concerning an image of oneself closely linked to the established role in relationships and one's life (e.g., future, life, school, study, home). In the opposite polarity (X-), instead, there was a centering, awareness, and contact with oneself, one's emotions, difficulties (e.g., start, situation, strong), and ideas, and others, whom to ask and with whom to express oneself, share, and discuss.

b) FACTOR 2-Y AXIS - Movement of the Self: Self-fixed (Y+) vs. Self-unfixed (Y-).

We found adjectives and relationships that referred to the image of oneself as being immobile, blocked in decisions by expectations and family judgment (e.g., choice, time, remember, think, start). In the polarity (Y-), it was possible to recognize lemmas that identified the mobility of students, understood as temporal mobility (past-future), as well as the individual, linked to their passions, directed towards "doing" (e.g., realize, tell, understand).

The young participants in the workshop had turned to counseling for psychological difficulties. In the productions carried out after the workshop (post), the following emerged: a greater symbolic elaboration of one's own emotional experiences and the ability to express and identify the relational context within which they are inscribed; a different way of constructing the "Self-Image", highlighting a shift from "I am as I believe others see me" to "I am in relation to my feelings, others, my history, my projects"; and a new perspective that allows the user to leave a perspective of "delegation and impotence" and feeds the enhancement of a greater "self-efficacy and self-empowerment" that favors the well-being and health of the students themselves.

Discussion and conclusions

In this phase of transition and uncertainty, the young adult is called to reorganize their social role and, more generally, their self, through a readaptation of old and new patterns of themselves and the world. They therefore face critical situations related to the overcoming of the different tasks of development, such as the modification of social relations (with peers, teachers, family), the management of daily life, the making of new space–time scans (for example, a change of city), and the readaptation to life and study management within the university. The resolution of these tasks generates strong levels of stress and anxiety (Savarese et al., 2019a, 2019b) that

Fig. 5. Co-occurence matrix of Self-characterization in pre/post-intervention of counseling workshop
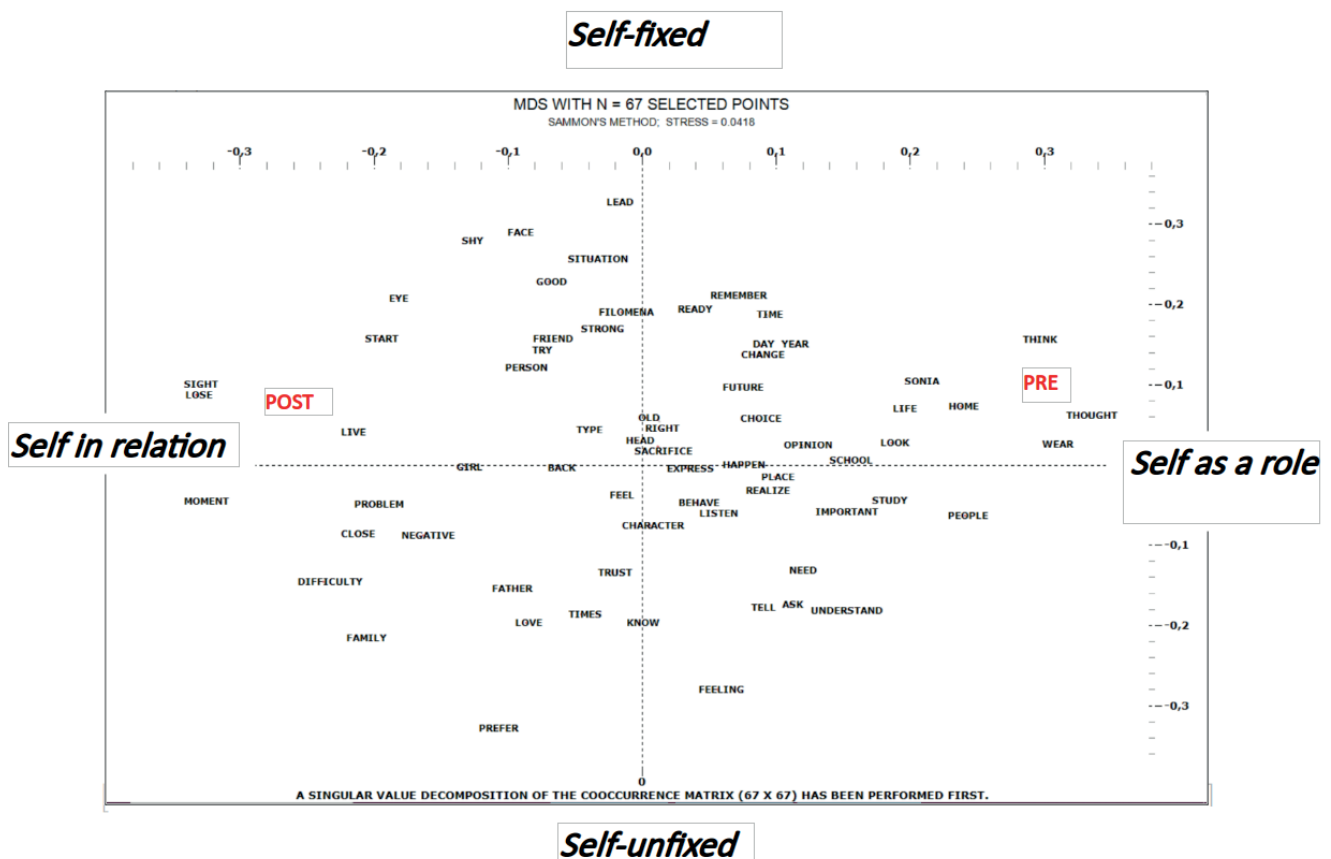
affect university performance and require adequate cognitive, emotional–affective, strategic–behavioral, and relational skills (Savarese et al., 2016).

Our results showed that young adults often experience a range of feelings and emotions as they face the transition to university. This period can be exciting but also stimulating and, sometimes, challenging. Many young people are excited to begin this new phase of their lives, although anxiety is often present, as students may feel anxious about academic expectations, workload, time management, and the fear of not living up to expectations or not fitting in socially.

Many students are faced with important choices, such as setting career goals, which can often generate doubts about their future.

The transition to university entails an increase in independence, which can be liberating for some but frightening for others. Finding a sense of belonging can take time, but many students end up making meaningful connections with fellow students, professors, and student groups.

Overcoming initial challenges, achieving good academic results, or reaching personal goals can bring a sense of pride and accomplishment. The impact of an environment that is completely different from the previous school, social, and affective reality can be considered one of the main factors contributing to the psychological distress of the university student (De Beni, Lis, Sambin, and Trentin, 1997). University reality requires compliance with new social rules. These rules impose an affective reorganization of the subject. These critical issues emerge in a developmental phase characterized by the transition from adolescence to adulthood, which requires the overcoming of specific tasks and processes, such as the separation–individuation of the self, the acquisition of autonomy, and the ability to establish and maintain intimate relationships (Fulcheri, Torre, and Caporale, 2003). This stage of development is often accompanied by several needs and inconveniences. These are added factors and specific tasks of the university path (De Beni et al., 1997). The process of separation–individuation takes place not only through the formation of personal identity and professional competence but also through new experiences and profound revisions of relationships with family members and peers. In this transition phase, resources and limits are measured and highlighted. In addition, difficulties and conflicts can arise related to the existential choices that make identity construction possible (Fulcheri and Accomazzo, 1999).

The results of numerous research studies conducted in the university context, both in Italy and abroad, support the hypothesis that the transition to university and the characteristics of university life itself may play a role in the manifestation of mental health problems (Fulcheri, Torre, and Caporale, 2003; Prince, 2015). A certain amount of stress is likely unavoidable; obstacles encountered during the educational process can hurt students, promoting adjustment difficulties and psychological malaise (Biasi, Mallia, Menozzi, and Patrizi, 2015; Clinciu, 2013; Fulcheri, Giordanengo, Torre, Dotti, and Perrone, 2003). It is not uncommon to find the presence of disorders, such as depression and anxiety, in the student population, which can negatively affect the learning process. These issues can be critical barriers to students' academic success (Prince, 2015).

In some cases, young adults have serious problems related to difficulties in coping with the separation–individuation process, but only in a few cases do they fall within recognizable psychopathological frameworks. The critical event leading to the decision to seek help is sometimes in the foreground. At other times, it seems to be absent. In some cases, anxiety or self-image issues are evident. In other cases, in the absence of an external critical event, it is the developmental stage itself that creates tensions and "knots" in the family and personal context. Sometimes, the student's distress can be traced to the realm of "anxiety disorders" (performance anxiety, generalized anxiety, panic attacks, phobias) (Downing et al., 2020). Discomfort related to the relational sphere may still exist among the student population. A recent study conducted in Italy on 250 female college students (Biasi et al., 2015) shows the presence of problems related to social integration and difficulties in interpersonal relationships, as well as in regulating affect. These findings are in line with previous research showing a higher incidence of anxiety and depression among female college students (Biasi et al., 2017; Hunt and Eisenberg, 2010), as well as difficulties with adjustment to college life, in comparison to male students (Blanco et al., 2021; Asher BlackDeer et al. 2023).

As our results showed, after participating in our workshop focused on enhancing self-efficacy, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and emotions, significant positive changes emerged in the lives of the participants. Through exploration and reflection on their life experiences, the participants developed increased self-awareness and a greater sense of their capabilities, leading to enhanced self-efficacy. This newfound self-confidence contributed to strengthening the participants' self-esteem, enabling them to approach challenges and obstacles with a more positive outlook. Additionally, the workshop provided a valuable opportunity to improve interpersonal relationships, as the participants learned to communicate more effectively, actively listen, and develop empathy, resulting in deeper and more meaningful connections with others. Furthermore, the workshop allowed the participants to explore and manage their emotions more consciously and healthily, paving the way for greater emotional resilience and improved stress management. In summary, the autobiographical workshop provided individuals with the tools and resources necessary for personal growth and embarking on a journey toward a more fulfilling and satisfying life.

From our qualitative analysis, significant changes emerged both for group dynamics: relational ones were more stable and consolidated, assuming, in the post phase, connotations of interdependence between the individual and the group; and individual dynamics, a strengthening of the sense of self-efficacy and resilience emerged. Strengthening one's interpersonal resources means being able to adopt a new perspective that allows one to exit a perspective of "delegation and powerlessness" and nourish and cultivate in oneself a greater sense of self-efficacy, both about one's individuality and others. There is a shift from "I am as I think others see me" to "I am in relation to my feelings, to others, to my history, to my projects", which highlights a different way of constructing the "self-image".

A qualitative-quantitative study on students' self-representation during the transition process to university can provide a wide range of useful information to better

understand and support students in this critical phase of their lives. However, as with any type of research, there are strengths and weaknesses to consider. First, the qualitative-quantitative approach allowed the collection of qualitative and quantitative data, offering a complete and in-depth vision of the phenomenon under examination. This could have helped us identify patterns and trends that may have not emerged with just one type of research method. Furthermore, the possibility of using a mixed approach allowed us to identify complex relationships between variables and predictive factors that influenced self-representation during the student's transition to university. On the other hand, the limitations to be considered included the size of the sample examined, which, on a quantitative level, did not allow us to carry out an even more detailed statistical analysis. Analyzing data on a limited number of participants could reduce the representativeness of the research and increase the risk of unrepresentative results.

Ethical Approval

This study was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of Associazione Italiana di Psicologia (AIP), Italy. This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the legislation of the Italian Code regarding the protection of personal data (Legislative Decree 196/2003); the participants were informed about the general purpose of this research, the anonymity of the answers, and the voluntary nature of participation, and they signed an informed consent form. There were no incentives given. This study was approved by the local Ethics Committee (number 01/2021).

Data Availability Statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the subject(s) in order to publish this paper.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, G.S. and L.C.; methodology, G.S. and L.C.; formal analysis, L.C.; investigation, M.M. and D.D.; resources, G.S.; data curation, N.P. and L.C.; writing—original draft preparation, G.S. and L.C.; writing—review and editing, M.M. and N.P.; supervision, D.D.; project administration, G.S. and L.C. All the authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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