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Students' Coping with Mental States Caused by Intrapersonal Conflict

Abstract: This paper conducts a comparative analysis of internal conflict's intensity among students according to three parameters (loneliness, guilt, and resentment), taking into account digital technology use. The research was conducted in 2020 in Moscow (Russian Federation) among 98 university students, who were diagnosed with intrapersonal conflict. Interviewing methods and Gestalt therapy were used to reduce the intensity of internal conflicts. The level of three parameters among students at the beginning and at the end of the study was taken into account: loneliness, resentment, guilt. The number of students with a high level of loneliness decreased 25 times ($p \leq 0.001$) after therapy. The number of students with an average level of loneliness increased because students with a high level of loneliness moved into this category. The number of students with a maximum level of resentment decreased fivefold, and there was a 17-fold decrease in students with a high level of resentment ($p \leq 0.001$). There were no students with a maximum level of guilt after the consultation, while the number of students with a high level of guilt decreased only 0.5 times ($p \leq 0.05$) because students from the previous category moved to this one. The most popular activities among students were Internet use (100% of students), reading books (61 students, $p \leq 0.05$ compared to the Internet use), and watching TV (32 students, $p \leq 0.01$).

Keywords: *intrapersonal conflict, resentment, loneliness, guilt, Gestalt therapy, Internet technology.*

INTRODUCTION

For each person at the initial stage of their life, the choice of a profession is of decisive importance. When the goals, interests, education, and work of a young person coincide, their potential is realized. They are in a harmonious social relationship with the people around them and their groups (Ziede & Norcross, 2020). Moreover, an individual can further realize their capabilities, as well as has the capacity for the growth of their professional activity (Carr, Goranson, & Drummond, 2014). Thus, the desire for self-determination in professional activity is usually associated with adolescence or young adulthood and contributes to the early maturation of the individual.

At the same time, in the process of making such momentous decisions, there is a struggle, a conflict situation inside each individual. First, this is associated with such tendencies as the desire to make a vital choice that would coincide, to some extent, with the interests of the young person (Augustin & Morelli, 2017). The characteristics of temperament, personality structure, motives, and values play an important role in decision making (Bearse, McMinn, Seegobin, & Free, 2014; Staemmler, 2020). Among the external factors influencing the internal decision, the society's need for professionals in the given field and the situation in the market of the particular profession plays a determining role (Karshiyeva, 2020).

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Alienation, desocialization, and, eventually, mental health crises are possible in the case of a wrong decision, when the education received and the needs of the job market do not coincide (Nussbaum, 2016).

Intrapersonal refers to the conflict of motivations, feelings, needs, interests, and behaviors in a person (Haig, 2006). All conflict situations occur within the consciousness of only one person (Colman et al., 2016).

In psychoanalysis, biopsychological approach to the treatment of intrapersonal conflict is the main one (Polster, 2015). When an individual is in intrapersonal conflict, there is an intense struggle in the psyche between desires that are defended by some parts of the personality and refuted by others who have desires of their own (Johnson, Barnett, Elman, Forrest, & Kaslow, 2013). From Jung's (in 1954) perspective, intrapersonal conflict leads to regressive personality changes, because its main part takes place at the unconscious level (Fried, 2015). Horney (1945) posits that intrapersonal conflict is caused by the need to satisfy one's aspirations, and the conflict situation of neurotic desires ultimately leads to frustration of the people around the person (Workman & Reader, 2014). Humanistic psychology, within the framework of Rogers' concept (in 1959), views intrapersonal conflict as a conflict that results from an inadequate assessment of the self at the conscious level (an attitude that is acquired during lifetime) and the unconscious level (Workman & Reader, 2014). According to Maslow (1954), the core of conflict within the individual is in the lack of realization of the individual's needs for self-actualization (Hatchard et al., 2017). Frankl (1946), on the contrary, sees the origins of intrapersonal conflict in the loss of life meaning (Geller, 2017). In cognitive psychology, intrapersonal conflict results from cognitive dissonance, which leads to discomfort and attempts to eliminate it (Chiesa & Serretti, 2010). Behaviorists view intrapersonal conflict as a negative consequence of faulty parenting, or as a frustration, a set of behavioral responses to an obstacle (Coffey et al., 2017).

A common tendency of all the above-mentioned branches of psychology is a negative perception of intrapersonal conflict, which is associated with negative emotions, struggles, development of contradictions in the structure of personality, and overcoming these mental processes (Gold, Hilsenroth, Kuutmann, & Owen, 2015).

The age corresponding to the student age is associated with the sociogenic development of personality. Therefore, for young people who are just forming their social ties, intrapersonal conflicts can maximally manifest themselves (Goncher, 2011). This makes students a rather interesting model group for the study of intrapersonal conflicts. The age between 17 and 22-25 years is the stage of maturation and growing up (Goncher, 2011). Therefore, the study of intrapersonal conflicts in students is highly relevant because it will help to understand what general trends exist in the development of intrapersonal conflicts (Norcross & Lambert, 2018).

Intrapersonal conflict is quite widespread; it can occur in 10-25% of the entire sample of respondents surveyed. Because of the commonality of intrapersonal conflicts among all people, naturally, there are mechanisms for overcoming these conflicts. They are associated with understanding and acceptance of intrapersonal conflict. This is the initial stage, which is followed by the search for solutions to the conflict situation in connection with the renewed view of the problem. Such solutions may manifest themselves when a person's previous value system has outgrown itself because of its inconsistency with life situations and the individual's current experience (Geller, 2017).

However, along with the intense internal struggle and search for solutions to the conflict situation, a person, especially a young person, may sometimes need help from the outside as well. Qualified help of a psychologist will help to overcome such characteristic states of intrapersonal conflict as resentment, anger, frustration, guilt, and loneliness (Fried, 2015).

The problem of the frequency of intrapersonal conflicts and the frequency of digital technology use (mass media, Internet resources) is of particular relevance in today's world. Research in this area has mainly focused on the incidence of various mental disorders associated with active social media activity, as well as the academic performance of students that are active and non-active users of digital technologies (Augustin & Morelli, 2017; Nussbaum, 2016). Therefore, research that connects intrapersonal conflict and the mental states of students experiencing it seems relevant. Gender differences in intrapersonal conflict can also be important at college age, since hedonic motives and self-esteem of one's place in society may predominate for young men, while appearance parameters may be important for girls, which, in turn, will reflect their status in society. This study is the first to analyze not only the frequency of intrapersonal conflict among students but also the use of digital technology. The authors assume that the frequency of internal conflicts among students as a crisis group may be at least one fifth of the entire sample. Another hypothesis of the study is that there is a certain correlation between the frequency of media use and the frequency of internal conflicts. It can be associated with the fact that the information from television and the Internet (news, etc.) is most often brightly negative, which can only increase stress. Revealing such patterns in the occurrence of internal conflicts will help students to overcome mental states, which are the consequences of contradictions between desires and realization in the psyche (Gizinger & Khisamova, 2021; Trineeva, 2021).

The aim of the study was to conduct a comparative analysis of the frequency of internal conflicts among students, considering the use of digital technology. The objectives of the study were: a) to identify the frequency of internal conflicts among students; b) to establish the main driving forces of these conflicts (guilt, resentment, and loneliness); c) to explore the relationship between the frequency of digital technology use and the frequency of intrapersonal conflicts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample

The study was conducted in January-December 2020 in Moscow at one of the universities (Russian Federation). Two hundred students took part in the study. Based on the surveys, 98 students who had intrapersonal conflict were further recruited. For the sample to be homogeneous in terms of age composition, only the first-year students were selected. To exclude the gender factor, the study focused only on young men. Male students accounted for up to 60% of the total, so it was decided to focus the research on them. The average age of the young men was 18.7 ± 0.5 years. Thus, the studied sample had an identical gender and age composition, which helped to assess the obtained results. The sample, thus, corresponded to one group, including students who had intrapersonal conflict.

Research Design

The participants were selected at random. The study included students who signed a written contract in which they agreed to take part in the study. The contract guaranteed respondents confidentiality and anonymity of the obtained data. The students agreed to include the name of the university where they study, as well as the name of their course. The study was conducted in accordance with international ethics and moral standards. The study was approved at a meeting of the Ethics Committee of Lomonosov Moscow State University (Protocol No. 459). Students who met the following criteria were included in the study:

- a) presence of a signed written contract;
- b) absence of serious mental problems (high levels of depression and anxiety corresponding to borderline mental states). High levels of depression can represent a terminal stage of internal conflict, so students with this level were not included in the study;
- c) absence of severe chronic diseases of organs and their systems (problems with musculoskeletal system, diseases of cardiovascular and endocrine systems, respiratory and digestive systems, and pronounced skin diseases). The presence of chronic diseases in students was clarified by analyzing their medical records.

The presence of such illnesses could affect the overall mental state of the students, exacerbating the results for the worse. All students who did not meet at least one of the above criteria were not included in the study.

Research Methods

The authors used several questionnaires to identify different mental states of students. To identify the level of loneliness, the authors used the questionnaire developed by D. Russel and M. Fergusson (1978). The questionnaire includes 20 questions, the maximum number of points gained is 60. Each answer has 4 options chosen by the respondent. Loneliness is a complex condition that corresponds to an acute perception of the surrounding reality.

The questionnaire by L. Wasserman (2004) was used to determine how socially frustrated a person is. The

questionnaire allows establishing how dissatisfied the respondent is with his achievements and with his position in society. The questionnaire includes 20 questions with 5 answers each. Frustration is also one reason for the dynamics of internal personality conflict.

The L. Budassi questionnaire (1971) was used to test the respondents' level of self-esteem. The respondent should describe in two columns the qualities that in his opinion fit an ideal person, and vice versa, the negative qualities of personality. The test allows one to establish the respondent's level of self-esteem.

To assess the use and engagement in digital technology, a questionnaire by Yu. Dolgov (2011) was used. This questionnaire allows one to establish the style of information perception, as well as the mechanisms of processing this information received with the help of digital technologies (television, Internet resources – social networks, visiting websites). The questionnaire has 4 scales matching the specifics of a person's learning and perception of information.

To establish how active the respondent is in terms of information consumption, the questionnaire "Structure of motivation in information consumption" was used. This questionnaire, comprising 4 blocks of questions, reveals the individual characteristics of information consumption.

After passing all the psychological tests, students showing low self-esteem, guilt, resentment, and loneliness were invited to consult a psychologist, to which 100% of the participants agreed. One month later, all the tests for resentment, guilt, and loneliness were repeated. Seven to nine 60-minute counseling sessions were conducted with each individual student. The point of consultations was to help the respondent find an independent solution to the internal conflict. The psychologist controlled the respondent's unidirectional approach to resolving his internal conflicts by understanding and accepting them. The psychologist's intervention intended to find out what was useful for a respondent in resolving his internal conflict.

Statistical Analysis

The results were entered into an Excel 2016 database (Microsoft Corp., the USA) with plots. Statistical processing of the data was performed using the program Statistics, version 7.0 (Statsoft Inc., the USA). The following parameters were calculated: arithmetic mean (points) and error of the mean. Student's t-test for dependent samples was used to compare reliability of differences in the sample before and after the consultation. Spearman's correlation was used to establish possible relations between the studied attributes. The minimum level of reliable differences between the samples was $p \leq 0.05$.

RESULTS

The level of loneliness among students was high before the consultation, but sharply decreased afterwards (see Figure 1).

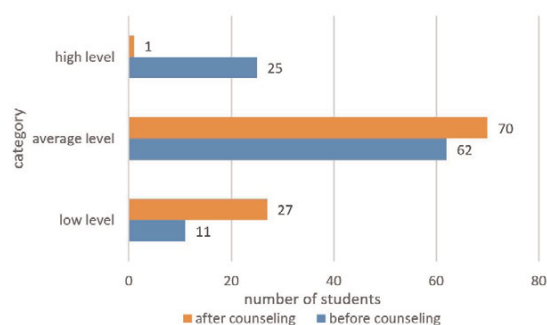


Figure 1. Rates of loneliness among first-year students included in the study, before and after counseling sessions

The number of students with a high level of loneliness decreased 25 times ($p \leq 0.001$). The number of students with an average level of loneliness increased slightly ($p \leq 0.05$) because of the decrease in the proportion of students with a high loneliness level.

The number of students with a low level of loneliness also increased 2.6 times ($p \leq 0.01$). This group appears to have included students who had an average level of loneliness prior to counseling.

Resentment indicators also changed significantly (Figure 2).

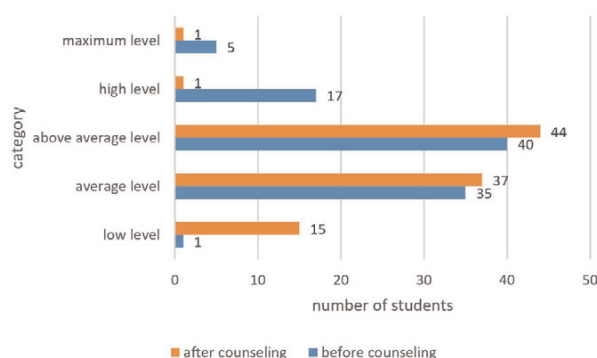


Figure 2. Resentment rates among first-year students before and after counseling sessions

There was a 5-fold decrease in students with maximum resentment ($p \leq 0.01$); a 17-fold decrease of those with high resentment ($p \leq 0.001$); and the number of those with high and medium resentment remained unchanged ($p \geq 0.05$). Again, the lack of such changes was due to the transition of students who previously had maximum and high resentment levels. There was a 15-fold change in the number of students with a low resentment level ($p \leq 0.001$), also due to the transition to this category of students with a higher level of resentment.

Similar trends were recorded for guilt expression (Figure 3). Students with the maximum level of guilt were not identified after the consultation ($p \leq 0.0001$). The number of students with a high level of guilt decreased only 0.5 times ($p \leq 0.05$) because the students from the previous category moved to this one.

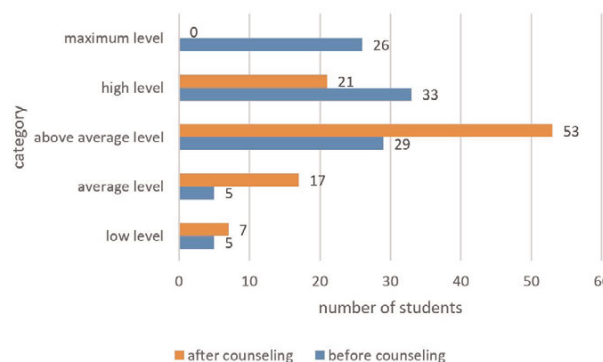


Figure 3. Guilt rates among the first-year students in the study, before and after counseling sessions

The number of students with an excessive level of guilt increased 1.8 times, due to the transition to this category of students from among those with a maximum and high level of guilt ($p \leq 0.02$). The number of students with an average level of guilt increased 3.2 times ($p \leq 0.01$). The number of students with a low level of guilt did not change significantly ($p \geq 0.05$).

Thus, the conducted counseling sessions had an unequivocally positive effect on students. Significant changes were recorded, further confirmed by Student's t-test: $t=4.981$ ($p \leq 0.001$) for the feeling of guilt, $t=2.532$ ($p \leq 0.05$) for the feeling of resentment, $t=2.346$ ($p \leq 0.05$) for the feeling of loneliness. This indicates that the feeling of guilt underwent the greatest change.

Analysis of role confrontation in students showed that in general they have a low evaluation of their willpower qualities, as well as low rates of activity required to overcome various obstacles, including internal conflicts (Table 1).

Table 1. The Levels Displaying Role Confrontations between Students

Parameter	Self-esteem indicator	Strength indicators	Activity indicators
Mean value	9.3	4.0	4.7
Error	1.1	0.5	0.5

The only parameter that turned out to be at a sufficiently high level among students was self-esteem. The survey revealed that Internet technology is the most popular among students (98 students, or 100%), followed by reading books (61 students, $p \leq 0.05$ compared to the frequency of Internet use). Television usage frequency was the lowest (32 students, $p \leq 0.01$), indicating that most students prefer to get information from the Internet, and that television is giving way to the Internet as a source of information among young people.

The authors found 8 statistically significant Spearman's correlations between the level of intrapersonal conflict and the level of information uptake from Internet resources (Table 2).

Table 2. Spearman's Correlation Levels between Intrapersonal Conflict and Information Uptake from Internet Resources among the Studied Students (n=98)

Indicator	Correlations and significance levels	Communication motive	Relaxation motive	Reactivation motive	Compensation motive	Reading books	Critical use of Internet resources	Effectiveness in finding necessary information
Intrapersonal conflict related to adaptation	Correlation coefficient	0.04	-0.08	-0.04	0.07	0.11	0.29	-0.22
	P ≤	0.88	0.56	0.66	0.61	0.39	0.006*	0.05
Intrapersonal conflict related to low self-esteem	Correlation coefficient	0.08	0.07	0.07	-0.05	-0.09	-0.26	0.15
	P ≤	0.51	0.58	0.57	0.78	0.66	0.02*	0.18
Intrapersonal conflict related to the misperception of one's willpower	Correlation coefficient	-0.14	-0.21	0.23	-0.31	-0.30	0.15	0.21
	P ≤	0.27	0.04*	0.05*	0.02*	0.04*	0.27	0.05*
Assessment of one's online activity	Correlation coefficient	0.19	-0.16	0.16	-0.25	0.06	-0.11	0.04
	P ≤	0.10	0.28	0.18	0.03*	0.88	0.36	0.87

* differences are significant

There is a positive correlation between intrapersonal conflicts related to adaptation and the use of Internet resources (0.29, see Table 2), and an inverse correlation between self-esteem and Internet browsing (-0.26). Thus, when students have a higher level of adaptation conflict and a lower level of self-esteem, they turn to Internet resources more often. Such students are less sociable and have a certain level of insecurity. An inverse relationship was found between students' compensation motive and the indicators of their online activity (-0.25). Students who spend a lot of time on the Internet compensate for their low level of activity in other areas. The maximum number of correlations is found for students' misperception of willpower and several indicators, such as reading books (-0.30), compensation motives (-0.31), relaxation (-0.21), reactivation (0.23), and the efficiency of finding necessary information on the Internet (0.21). Low correlation values may be a reflection of the complex influence of all the factors analyzed, when none of them is determinative or limiting. Thus, the Internet may impact the development of internal conflicts in students that they cannot resolve on their own.

DISCUSSION

The results show that students who often turn to reading books and spend a lot of time on the Internet in order to solve their personal problems have an internal conflict, which is rooted in underestimation of their volitional qualities. The purpose of using Internet resources is an attempt to resolve their internal conflicts by controlling them and their mental state through the use of social networks and other information websites. Feeling of loneliness is directly connected with guilt, because if an

individual personally becomes the object of aggression in an internal conflict, s/he will put the blame for any actions or thoughts on him/herself. On the other hand, resentment may be a consequence of loneliness, as an individual may feel resentment against him/herself, the inconsistency of his/her self with generally accepted standards and, as a consequence, not being part of his/her peer circle.

The authors did not monitor students' use of Internet resources after the consultations, but certain progress was achieved in the elimination of such indicators of internal conflict as loneliness, resentment, and guilt. The study confirmed that conversation with a psychologist and Gestalt therapy can decrease loneliness, since the subject can grasp the essence of the problem and look for ways to solve it (Hunter & Wu, 2016; Neimeyer, Taylor, & Cox, 2012). Getting support for oneself was a prerequisite (Lambert, 2010), which had a desired effect on the dynamics of changes in loneliness during the counseling process.

For the resentment indicator, its background was considered, as it is necessary to find the root of this feeling (Mastronardi, Pomilla, Ricci, & D'Argenio, 2013). The cause of resentment can be an unfinished project or a conviction (Sultanoff, 2013). The role of a counselor in this case was to understand and get into the essence of what was going on and to respond quickly to questions that arose (Neff, 2011; Neff & Germer, 2013). The full support of the respondent in transferring subconsciously perceived thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations into the realm of the conscious at the personality level is of great importance (Pope & Vasquez, 2016). In addition, it is important to take into account the interruptions of the established contact with the respondent, as well as to identify the mechanisms of regulating its boundaries

(Rousmaniere, 2017). All the above significantly reduced feelings of resentment in the students.

Working with feelings of guilt, such aspects as a timely recognition of this feeling and the specifics of its experience by the respondent were taken into account. This requires a strictly individual approach, because feelings of guilt may manifest themselves differently in each of the respondents. An important aspect of dealing with feelings of guilt by the respondent is the ability to forgive oneself and, thus, to let go of the feeling (Saxon & Barkham, 2012). Only under this condition can significant results be achieved when a counselor's role is reduced to regulation and a respondent's role is to deal with their internal conflicts, including guilt.

Of the three aspects of internal conflicts, the common pattern was that a conscious approach by a student helped a lot in resolving and overcoming those conflicts. For a psychologist, the main method was diagnostic.

Intrapersonal conflicts cause improper and asymmetrical personality development, when the best qualities can be hidden under layers of self-imposed complexes. This can significantly reduce a respondent's quality of life, especially when intrapersonal conflicts are laid down and actively progress during personality formation (Rousmaniere, 2017).

High expression of intrapersonal conflicts in boys and girls with high levels of depression, anxiety, resentment, prevails throughout adolescence and young adulthood in contrast to adolescents with normal indicators. Between the ages of 15 and 20, intrapersonal conflict of trust in adults, conflict of needs for independence and guardianship, conflict of ambivalent feelings, and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) are most pronounced. There are also gender differences. Among adolescents with deviant behavior, girls have a higher intensity of intrapersonal conflict related to BDD. Among adolescents with relative normality, boys have a higher intensity of intrapersonal conflict of trust in peers, and girls have a higher intensity of conflict of ambivalent feelings (Haig, 2006). According to the present study's data, isolation and loneliness can be exacerbated by active use of the Internet, particularly social media, when communication with peers is minimized.

A limitation of this study is that it was conducted among students from the same department and major. It is possible that the results from students from other majors will differ from the obtained in the current study. For this purpose it is necessary to carry out additional research. Age may also be important, younger and older students may have different intensities within personality conflict. Future studies should be conducted to compare the level of Internet use before and after therapy sessions, to identify changes in indicators of loneliness, guilt, and resentment after longer sessions in terms of time and number of sessions. This can certainly help many students to overcome their conflicts on their own and to express their best personality traits. An important aspect of the work is not to limit one's exposure to the Internet, but use the information provided competently.

CONCLUSIONS

After applying Gestalt therapy methods, statistically significant changes in such indicators of internal conflict as feelings of guilt, resentment, and loneliness were observed. In particular, the results of the Student's test showed that the feeling of loneliness decreased the most in the majority of students ($t=4.981$ ($p\leq 0.001$)) in comparison with the other two indicators. Changes regarding feelings of resentment and guilt decreased to a lesser but approximately equal degree ($t=2.532$ ($p\leq 0.05$) for the feeling of guilt and $t=2.346$ ($p\leq 0.05$) for the feeling of resentment). Thus, Gestalt therapy allowed most students to significantly reduce their inner conflicts. Most students with maximum and high levels of these three characteristics moved to the groups with lower levels. Using Internet resources was largely associated with lowered self-esteem, manifested in such personality features as conscious underestimation of the significance of one's actions and positive personal characteristics. This creates favorable conditions for the emergence and dynamics of intrapersonal conflicts, which respondents can overcome on their own only with ongoing therapy with minimal external intervention. The level of Internet use by such students is higher than that of those who do not have pronounced intrapersonal conflicts. They are generally less active, less communicative, and show less volitional qualities. All this points to the necessity of developing programs of psychological help for students to overcome their intrapersonal conflicts.

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