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## Supporting University Students During the Pandemic: A Study on The Efficacy of a Mentalizing Online Group Counselling

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### Abstract

**Background:** University counselling services assume a fundamental support function for students who are facing moments of crisis during their academic career. Such services often aim to reduce drop-out rates and achieve improvement in terms of psychological well-being. COVID-19 contagion containment measures have also had an impact on the psychological health of university students and their ability to cope with important developmental tasks. It has become necessary, therefore, to offer online counselling services which has become, however, the means of choice to support students during the university course in the pandemic era, as a complementary intervention to the traditional face-to-face approach.

**Methods:** In a clinical and health psychology perspective, this study aims to analyze the efficacy of 13 online counselling groups involving 66 *underachieving* students, lagging with their studies. The intervention has adopted the methodology of the Narrative Mediation Path, which aims at promoting mentalization, academic engagement and psychological well-being in order to have an impact on students' academic performance and prevent university dropouts. At the beginning and end of counselling the following measures were administered: a) Reflective Functioning Questionnaire, b) Psychological General Well-Being Index Short Form, c) Academic Performance Inventory, d) University Student Engagement Inventory, e) Group Climate Questionnaire.

**Results:** The results showed that online counselling groups enabled an overall improvement in all the variables considered.

**Conclusion:** Overall, the present study showed the efficacy of the online group counselling service in supporting students during the pandemic period and in coping with the difficulties encountered during the academic career.

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### Keywords:

Online group counselling; Mentalization; Psychological well-being; Academic engagement; University drop-out.

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## 1. Introduction

During last years, academic life has become increasingly stressful for students within higher education (Allan, McKenna & Dominey, 2013; Häarkäapääää, Junttila, & Jäärvikoski, 2014; McKenzie et al., 2015). Research suggested that mental health needs of university students are changing (Kitzrow, et al., 2003) from more positive developmental and informational needs to more concerning psychological problems (Gallagher, 2012). In fact, studies showed that higher education students are experiencing mental health difficulties at various levels like those experienced by individuals in the general population (Connell, Barkham & Mellor-Clark, 2007; Macaskill, 2013). Some research underlined an increase in students' need to attend counselling services to build resources and to face difficulties relating to academic issues. According to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 1999), university and college counselling centres aim to “assist students to define and accomplish personal, academic, and career goals by providing developmental, preventive, and remedial counselling” (p. 67). Furthermore, Thompson (2014) argued that counselling not only has a role in supporting students with psychological difficulties but could also contribute to academic outcomes. According to Brackney and Karabenick (1995), mental health problems may also have a negative impact on academic performance, retention, and graduation rates. Moreover, research reported that counselling was effective in reducing psychological distress, leading to a reliable and clinically significant change in students who joined university counselling (e.g., Connell, Barkham & Mellor-Clark, 2008). Indeed, university counselling may have a positive impact on personal well-being, academic success, and retention (Kitzrow, et al., 2003). With a specific focus on these latter outcomes, we may draw university counselling objectives under a Clinical Health Psychology perspective (Sirigatti & Casale, 2008; Freda et al., 2019). This perspective applies knowledge and techniques in order to prevent, but also assess and treat, both mental and physical disorders (Millon, Green, & Meagher, 1982), in other words it focuses on the promotion and maintenance of mental and physical health of the individuals (Dicé et al., 2017). The adjective “clinical” underlines the operational purposes of this perspective (Papas, Belar, & Rozensky, 2004) and intervention guidance (Belar, 2008). Clinical Health Psychology undertakes to provide and test interventions in order to intervene to promote individual's global health and psychological well-being (Martino et al., 2019). Therefore, a key aspect of Clinical Health Psychology is its focus on the effectiveness and efficacy of clinical interventions (Sirigatti & Casale, 2008). In this perspective, which combine the applied features of the clinical psychology and the attention to the individual's psychological well-being of the health psychology, and with a particular focus on the university counselling services, some constructs could have a pivotal role. In fact, mentalization, namely the ability to interpret one's own and others' behaviours as

based on intentional mental states (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016), is a psycho-social competence to be developed and promoted with individuals that face difficult developmental tasks and crisis (Marchetti, 2014). Therefore, this competence could be crucial also in individuals such as university students, who do not represent a clinical population, although it is prone to psychological distress. Although the great interest showed towards both psychopathology (Esposito et al., 2022a) and psychological well-being and their connection with the mentalizing ability of individuals (Antonsen et al., 2016; Hayden et al., 2018), only recently attention has been drawn to this relationship in the university context (Esposito et al., 2020b; De Coninck, Matthijs & Luyten, 2021). Moreover, to our knowledge, only a few studies have showed an association between psychological well-being and academic performance among university students (Chow, 2010; Cobo-Rendon et al., 2020; Esposito et al., 2020b). Psychological well-being (PWB) is a complex, multidimensional and dynamic construct that concerns optimal psychological functioning and experience (Tang, Tang & Gross, 2019) and it is a core feature of mental health and social functioning. PWB involves subjective, social, and psychological dimensions, health-related behaviours, and practices that add meaning to an individual's life and allow them to attain their maximum potential (Ryff, 2014; Ferrari et al., 2015; Lun & Bond, 2016; Friedman et al., 2017; Brim et al., 2019). When referring to university students, psychological well-being could also be associated with the quality of the relationship between student and university, namely the academic engagement (AE; Christenson et al., 2008), that has a pivotal role in academic success and retention (Lei, Cui & Zhou, 2018; Zepke, 2019; Marôco et al., 2020; Esposito et al., 2022b). AE refers to the positive and proactive positioning of the students in the academic context that captures students' quality of participation, investment, commitment, and identification with university and university-related activities to enhance students' performance (Alrashidi, Phan & Ngu, 2016). It is a complex and multidimensional construct that refers to dynamic processes with a personal and contextual nature (Kahu, 2013). Although there is still no consensus around this construct's definition, the most accredited model defined AE as composed of 3 dimensions: behavioural, cognitive and emotional (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). Several studies showed that students highly engaged experienced fewer depressive symptoms (Li & Lerner, 2011) and a higher satisfaction with life (Lewis et al., 2011).

### **1.1 New challenges: COVID-19 outbreak and online solutions**

For two years, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), the major health crisis of the modern era, affected people across the world. The lockdown instructions created a stressful situation for all people in the entire world. People were isolated, they had to avoid face-to-face (f2f) interactions and social communication, and they experienced feelings of loneliness, anger,

anxiety, boredom, and depression (Ahmed et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2020). Students in higher education institutions had to face various challenges in the wake of COVID-19 (Jiang et al., 2021). Many students reported mental health suffering due to the disruption of their academic routines (Agnew, Poole & Khan, 2019). The challenges and constraints faced by students concerning their research projects, internships, delay of graduation, and fears of transmitting the coronavirus to their family members when they return home could have, directly and indirectly, affected their mental health development (Pan et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020). During the lockdown period, most universities shifted instructional modes to remote learning or online learning. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in many universities, there had been an urgent need to provide online counselling to support university students since that the presence of mental health problems has often been linked to impaired academic achievement in college and university (Hysenbegasi et al., 2005; Bolinski et al., 2020). In recent years, even before COVID-19 outbreak, online counselling has been considered as a complement to the traditional f2f approach (Awabil & Akosah, 2018). In fact, the physical presence of two people in interaction in which one is engaged in satisfying the others' emotional needs remains the main form of therapeutic and counselling relationship (Taylor & Buku, 2006). However, nowadays, due to technological advancement, another form of counselling, online counselling, has emerged and it has been defined by Barak and Grohol (2011) as a mental health intervention between a patient or group of patients and a therapist using technology as the modality of communication. Online counselling refers to the process whereby a professional psychologist provides counselling services on the Internet. This could be by e-mail, chat, video or even Internet phone. Online counselling represents a viable alternative source of help when traditional f2f counselling cannot be provided (Adebowale, 2014). In terms of cost-effectiveness, research showed that online counselling presented many advantages, i.e., counselling can be provided from any location and at any time, it reduces transportable restrictions, and low-cost expenses (Boiler et al., 2014; Jones & Stokes, 2009). In addition, some research showed that e-mental health interventions have acquired a solid empirical basis for the prevention and treatment of various psychological conditions (Buntrock et al., 2016; Grist et al., 2019). During COVID-19 pandemic, online interventions have become the mean of election to treat and support mental health (Beaunoyer, Dupéré, & Guitton, 2020; Markowitz et al., 2021).

## **1.2 What about groups?**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, online psychological support and counselling sessions had been proposed to support students in facing stressful situations and academic-related problems. However, there is still a lot to clarify and understand regarding the online group setting, especially for the online synchronous groups (i.e., online groups in which participants are online

at the same time). In fact, although they might seem similar to f2f groups, intimacy is differently experienced in groups with an online setting, since there is no physical proximity, and the guarantee of privacy is not as easy (Weinberg, 2021). Moreover, although research provided solid data on online groups efficacy both before (Banbury et al., 2018; Varker et al., 2019) and during COVID-19 outbreak (Margherita et al., 2022), there is a lot to discuss regarding ethical issues and group functions and dynamics in absence of a material setting and with an unusual way of being present in the process (Weinberg, 2020). This issue is of particular interest to this study. Internet-based interventions have the perks of reducing some negative aspects that could be hindering both access and persistence in the therapeutic process, e.g. online interventions could be perceived as less stigmatizing and less time-consuming and they may overcome difficulties linked to geographical distance. Nevertheless, these benefits are counterbalanced by some limitations inherent to difficulties in enhancing interpersonal interactions and obstacles due to the shift from f2f to on-screen group practice, especially with respect to the reduced possibility to read, interpret and respond to both verbal and nonverbal cues (Marmarosh et al., 2020). As showed by Gullo and colleagues (2022), group interventions in online setting may bring difficulties in managing relationships, which may represent a barrier to enacting group therapeutic factors. In the online setting, it is possible to observe only a limited number of non-verbal cues (facial expressions, eye gaze) and the presence in the here and now may be perceived as more volatile. Altogether, this type of environment with no physical presence may significantly affect the group and its dynamics. Regarding group members' perception, online interaction may be considered as less "real" than f2f ones (Giordano et al., 2022).

With respect to group process, group climate, defined as the group members' perception of the atmosphere within the group (Mckenzie, 1981), is one of the most effective predictors of good outcome group interventions. Nevertheless, research in the online setting is rather scarce and has yielded mixed results: on the one hand, some research found in online group a climate similar to the one found in f2f setting (Arrow, Yap & Chester, 2021); on the other, online group members perceived less connection with the leader and the other members (Lopez et al., 2020).

### **1.3 Research context**

The online group counselling represented an adaptation to the online setting of a narrative method, the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP; Freda, Gonzalez-Monteagudo & Esposito, 2016), which aims at promoting mentalization among university students who are lagging behind with their studies and who are unsatisfied by their academic performance. Often, these students are out of course (i.e., *fuoricorsi* in Italian) and, although their competences, do not manage to fulfil their potentialities risking to leave their academic career. Online NMP is a weekly, seven-session online narrative group counselling (plus a follow-up session after 1 year) that integrates four of

the five narrative modes of NMP: metaphoric, iconographic, writing, and agency. The metaphoric mode (first session) involves mottos and proverbs, and the students are asked to choose one that represents their university experience (e.g., “He who makes his bed must lie in it” and “Yes, we can!”). In the iconographic mode (second and third sessions) six vignettes are given, each featuring a character engaged in a typical situation at university (e.g., enrolment, self-study, an informal moment at university), and students are asked to select one character and write a speech balloon containing the character’s thoughts or feelings for each vignette. The writing mode (fourth and fifth sessions) consists of three narrative assignments: students write about a low point, a high point, and a decisional turning point in their university experiences. Finally, in the agency mode (sixth and seventh session), students are asked to fill in a sort of action plan in which they indicate a goal they wish to achieve, and the actions required for accomplishing it. NMP in f2f setting comprises also the bodily mode which required the realization of a group sculpture that portrayed students’ academic future. Therefore, given the online setting and the social distancing required by COVID-19 anti-contagion instructions, this narrative mode was excluded. One year after the end of the counselling, a follow-up session is planned.

The NMP assumes that mentalizing improvements may influence the students’ psychological well-being, as explicit and implicit mentalizing concur in developing some important aspects of the psychological well-being, such as a coherent and continuous sense of self, the awareness of one’s own resources to set and achieve goals and, consequently, to ability to perceive the positivity of individual experiences and to generate hope about the future. NMP also assumes that mentalization may influence the students’ sense of agency (Esposito et al., 2020b); thus, by enhancing students’ understanding of how mental states can lead to poor academic performance, NMP aims to improve the students’ sense of authorship of their actions and the ability to perform more effectively at university, in turn reinforcing their engagement with the academic context.

In order to achieve the aim of mentalizing promotion, the function of the group is crucial in the entire counselling (Esposito, Karterud & Freda, 2021; Esposito, Marano & Freda, 2020). The NMP uses the group setting as a device that allows amplifying reflexive processes. The group becomes an instrument that activates a dynamic circuit of continuous mutual feedback, promotes a comparison between points of view and the identification and modification of the rigid or unjustified beliefs that can affect university performance without the student being aware of it (Esposito, Savarese & Squitieri, 2019).

Previous studies (Esposito et al., 2020a) have demonstrated that the NMP showed good integrity to the mentalizing group model; furthermore, it was demonstrated that in a single group

intervention, improvements in students' mentalization were parallel to improvements in students' academic performance (Esposito, Karterud & Freda, 2019). Moreover, a recent study published on this journal and related to the efficacy of 10 NMP group counselling (Esposito et al., 2020b) showed overall improvements in students' mentalizing ability, psychological well-being and academic performance. Specifically, this study showed that students' certainty about mental states slightly increased, while uncertainty decreased significantly, indicating a reduction in hypomentalizing. In terms of psychological well-being, students improved significantly switching from levels of severe distress to levels of non-distress and regarding their academic performance their degree of delay reduced significantly.

#### **1.4 Aims**

The aim of this study is to assess the efficacy of Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) online group counselling, the online adaptation of a model of online group counselling addressed to university students who are lagging with the acquisition of ECTS credits. Specifically, in continuity with previous study in the traditional f2f format, intervention efficacy was assessed in terms of the university students' mentalization (operationalized as reflective functioning; RF), psychological wellbeing and academic performance. Differently from previous study (Esposito et al., 2020), this study also aimed at evaluating students' academic engagement and group dynamics, assessed in terms of group climate.

Based on the results of the previous study (Esposito et al., 2020) we expect improvement in terms of RF, of psychological well-being and of academic performance. Moreover, regarding the new variables assessed in this study, we do not expect increasing in academic engagement levels due to the pandemic and the restrictions that affected universities too, and, in light of research on online group intervention (Lopez et al., 2020), we do not expect a thoroughly positive group climate.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1 Participants**

This study involved 66 university students ( $M = 27$ ;  $F = 39$ ;  $Mean_{age} = 25.29$ ;  $SD = 5.01$ ) who participated voluntarily in 13 online group counselling offered by the SInAPSi Center of University of Naples Federico II and who completed the questionnaire set both in pre-test and post-test phase. About 60% of the students was enrolled in a bachelor's degree Course, 40% in a master's degree Course. About 70% of students attended a scientific-technological degree course, 17% a medical degree course and 13% a socio-humanistic degree course. The sample was equally divided into regularly enrolled students (47%) and off-course students (53%), namely students enrolled in many years beyond their course study (Italian '*fuoricorsi*').

## 2.2 Measures

### 2.2.1 Reflective Functioning Questionnaire

The Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (RFQ; Fonagy et al., 2016) was used to assess students' RF ability at the beginning and end of counselling. The validated Italian version of the RFQ (Morandotti et al., 2018) consists of 8 items organised into two subscales, each with 6 items (two unique and four shared across the two scales), measuring the degrees of uncertainty (RFQ-U) and certainty (RFQ-C) about mental states. The RFQ-U subscale reflects the level of hypomentalizing, which has been defined as the tendency to develop poor or simplistic models of other people's and/or one's own minds, and it has been linked to concrete thinking or psychic equivalent modes of functioning (Fonagy et al., 2016). An exemplificative item is "*People's thoughts are a mystery to me*". The RFQ-C subscale reflects the level of hypermentalizing, which has been described as the polar opposite of hypomentalizing, and thus the tendency to develop very complex and rigid mental models that, despite their poor correspondence to appropriate evidence (Fonagy et al., 2016). "*I always know what I feel*" is a good example. Genuine mentalizing is distinguished instead by an observed ability to form relatively accurate models of one's own and others' minds, as well as a recognition of the opacity of mental states (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008; Fonagy et al., 2002). According to studies that used RFQ to assess mentalizing ability in various samples (Badoud et al., 2015; Carrera et al., 2018; Cucchi, Hampton, & Moulton-Perkins, 2018; Morandotti et al., 2018), genuine mentalization is identified by moderate scores on the certainty subscale (score that tends to 1) and low scores on the uncertainty subscale (score that tends to 0). Clinical interventions are expected to produce a positive outcome in terms of RF improvements if the certainty subscale mean score increases and the uncertainty subscale mean score decreases from pre-test to post-test.

The Italian validation study (Morandotti et al., 2018) confirms the questionnaire's psychometric properties and provides preliminary support for the RFQ's factorial invariance in clinical and non-clinical samples, as well as internal consistency and test-retest reliability.

### 2.2.2 Psychological General Well-Being Index – Short Version

In order to assess students' psychological wellbeing, the Psychological General Well-Being Index Short Version (PGWBI-SV) (Grossi et al., 2014) was administered at the beginning and end of the counselling. The questionnaire in its short form consists of 6 items and provides an overall index that allows to measure the subjective state of well-being or discomfort related to the emotional and affective sphere, in terms of anxiety, depressed mood, general optimism and satisfaction for life, self-control, vitality. An exemplificative item is "*How much energy, or vitality did you have or feel the past month?*". Indices u continuum the 4 levels on a continuum "wellbeing/psychological distress" of the original form, organized as follows: scores from 0 to



60 indicate severe distress levels, which may accompany mental problems; scores from 61 to 72 indicate moderate distress levels; scores from 73 to 97 indicate non-distress levels; scores from 98 to 110 indicate positive well-being levels. The PGWBI, in its short form (Grossi et al., 2014), is a questionnaire with good psychometric properties.

### **2.2.3 University Students Engagement Inventory**

In order to assess university engagement processes the University Student Engagement Inventory (USEI; Marôco et al., 2016) in the Italian validated version (Esposito et al., 2022b) was administered in pre and the post-test phases. The questionnaire is based on the multidimensional model of Fredricks and colleagues (2004) and conceptualizes student engagement both as a three-factor construct constituted by behavioral, emotional and cognitive dimensions and a second-order factor construct that is reflected in such dimensions. The USEI consists of 15 self-report items rated with a five-point Likert scale from '1-never' to '5-always'. Each of the three first-order factors is composed of five items which were possible responses to the affirmation 'Looking at your relationship with the university, we ask you to read the following statements and to assign a score ranging from 1 ("never") to 5 ("always").' The behavioral dimension assesses students' participation in classroom tasks and academic-related extracurricular activities. An exemplificative item for this dimension is "*I participate actively in group assignments*". The emotional dimension measures both the positive and negative feelings related to professor and classmate interactions, as well as feelings of belonging to the university. An exemplificative item for this dimension is "*I like being at university*". Finally, the cognitive dimension assesses the students' investment and willingness to exert the necessary efforts for the comprehension and mastering of complex ideas and difficult skills. An exemplificative item for this dimension is "*I try to integrate the acquired knowledge in solving new problems*". The USEI allows to obtain both a single score for each dimension and an overall index of academic engagement. Mean scores above 3 indicate medium-high levels of academic engagement.

The USEI has previously been assessed for factorial validity, reliability, measurement invariance across genders and areas of study in Portuguese speaking students (Marôco et al., 2016; Sinval et al., 2018) and in nine different countries from Europe, North and South America, Africa and Asia (Assunção et al., 2020). Moreover, the scale in its Italian validation showed acceptable psychometrics properties (Esposito et al., 2022b).

### **2.2.4 Academic Performance Inventory**

In order to assess the impact of the counselling groups, the Academic Performance Inventory (API; Esposito, Freda & Manzo, 2016) was administered to participants before and at the end of the intervention. The API consists of questions related to the university career of the participants (number of exams taken, European Credits Transfer System ECTS gained, the year

of enrolment, the number of exams passed, etc) (number of exams taken, European Credits Transfer System ECTS gained, the year of enrolment, the number of exams passed, etc). For the purposes of this study, we consider the number of ECTS and the year of enrolment, which allowed us to calculate the Degree Completion Rate (DCR), which assessed the gap between the number of ECTSs earned and the number of ECTSs expected to be earned based on the student's year of enrollment.

### 2.2.5 Group Climate Questionnaire

The Group Climate Questionnaire – Short Form (GCQ-S; MacKenzie, 1983) is the most commonly used group process instrument in the literature. The GCQ is a self-report measure that assesses individual group member's perceptions of the group's therapeutic environment. It contains 12 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale indicating extent of agreement ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 6 ("extremely"). The GCQ consists of three subscales, namely Engagement, Avoidance, and Conflict, reflecting bonding and therapeutic work, avoidance of responsibility for group work, and conflict and hostility in groups, respectively, and representing behavioural descriptions of group climate in clear, simple language, requiring little interpretation (MacKenzie, 1998). The Engagement scale describes constructive therapeutic work, including a positive working atmosphere, cognitive understanding, group cohesion, confrontation, and self-disclosure. An exemplificative item is "*The members liked and cared for each other*". The Conflict scale measures interpersonal anger, distancing, distrust, and tension. An exemplificative item is "*There was friction and anger between the members*". The Avoidance scale includes when members might avoid constructive involvement, such as avoiding issues between members, depending on the group leader, and engaging in high social monitoring. An exemplificative item is "*The members avoided looking at important issues going on between themselves*". Scores on the Engagement scale above 3, and scores on the Conflict and Avoidance scales below 3 indicate positive group climate (Johnson, 2013)

The Italian version of the GCQ showed good psychometric properties (Costantini et al., 2002). Although several studies on group process found the GCQ Avoidance subscale to be psychometrically problematic, the GCQ remains one of the most commonly used measures in group research (Burlingame et al., 2004).

### 2.3 Procedures

The counselling groups were held during the academic year 2019-2020 on the platform Microsoft Teams. They were conducted by clinical psychologists and psychotherapists specifically trained on the use of the NMP methodology. The participation of the students was voluntary, and all the students signed an informed consent in accordance to the Italian Privacy and Data Protection Act (No. 196/2003), the ethical principles of the Italian Association of

Psychology (AIP) and the Helsinki Declaration. Through informed consent, students agreed to use of narrative materials and data provided in questionnaires for educational and research purposes.

## 2.4 Data analysis

In order to evaluate the improvements in the academic performance, at first, for each student, we computed the DCR, previously presented, according to the following formula:

$$DCR = \left( \frac{GAINED\ ECTS}{EXPECTED\ ECTS} \right) \times 100$$

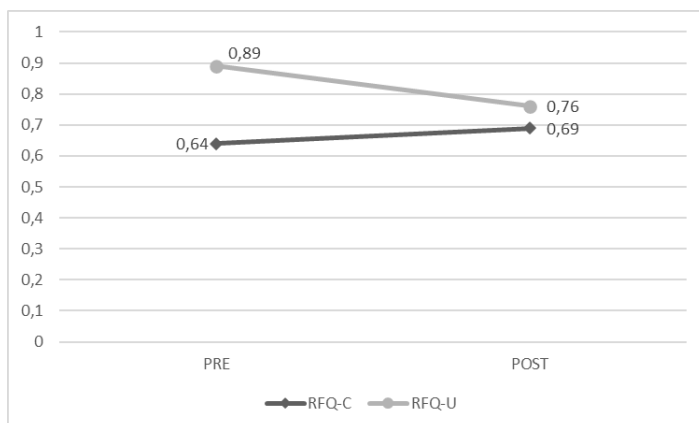
In order to evaluate students' psychological well-being, RF, academic performance and academic engagement, we performed the T-test for paired samples (with  $\alpha = .025$ , to correct for multiple comparisons) to assess if there were significant differences, from the pre to post-test phase, for the PGWBI overall index, the RFQ subscales' scores, the USEI overall index, the DCR and subscales scores and the GCQ subscales.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Outcome results

#### 3.1.1. Reflective Functioning Questionnaire

The analyses performed on the whole sample showed increasing certainty about mental states and decreasing uncertainty about mental states (see Fig. 1 and Tab. 1). As shown, both RFQ-C and RFQ-U scores moved in the expected direction. Nevertheless, differently from the RFQ-C scores, the RFQ-U scores showed a significant statistical decrease between the pre and the post-test phase. Same trend was found in f2f group counselling (Esposito et al., 2020b).



**Figure 1.** Growth analysis of RFQ subscales

#### 3.1.2. Psychological General Well-Being Index

The analyses performed on the whole sample showed a significant improvement ( $t = -6.998$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $d = -.861$ ) of the overall index of the psychological well-being (see Tab. 1) from 41.54

to 58.28. Although the statistically significant improvement, results showed that the sample reported level of severe distress both in pre and post-test phase. Differently, in f2f setting, although presenting in pre-test phase similar levels of distress, post-test scores indicated a shift towards non-distress (Esposito et al., 2020b).

### 3.1.3. University Students Engagement Inventory

The analyses performed on the whole sample showed a significant improvement ( $t = -2.868$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $d = -.476$ ) of the overall index of the academic engagement (see Tab. 1). Furthermore, there was a significant statistical improvement of each subscale, excepted the Emotional subscale (Tab. 1).

## 3.2. Impact results

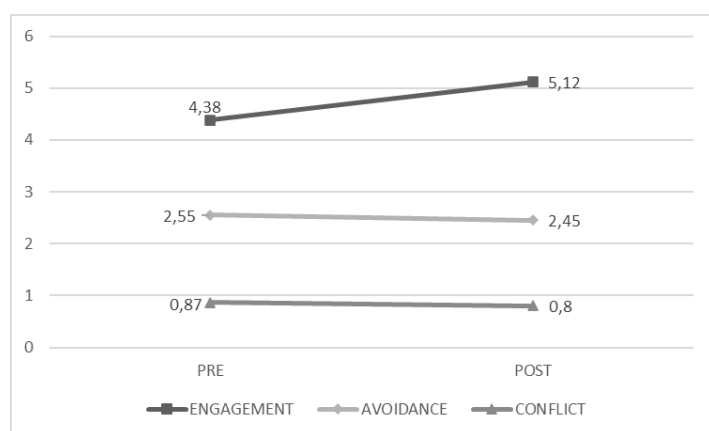
### 3.2.1. Academic Performance

Analysis showed a significant improvement in academic success ( $t = -2.566$ ;  $p = .013$ ;  $d = -.316$ ). Thus, the sample presented a significant reduction in the discrepancy between expected and acquired ECTS, indicating that after counselling students reduced the delay accumulated in previous academic years and improved their academic performance (from 29.74 to 31.9 on the DCR). Same trend was found in previous study (Esposito et al., 2020b).

## 3.3. Group process

### 3.3.1. Group Climate Questionnaire

The analyses of GCQ showed that the group climate perceived by participants was good, with high levels of engagement, and low levels of avoidance and conflict, both in pre and post-test phase (see Fig. 2). Moreover, T-test also showed that engagement increased significantly along the process (Tab. 1), while avoidance and conflict showed a slight, but non-significant decrease.



**Figure 2.** Growth analysis of GCQ dimensions

**Table 1.** Means, T-test and effect size for DCR, RFQ, USEI and GCQ

	PRE-TEST MEAN	POST-TEST MEAN	T	P VALUE	EFFECT SIZE (D)
DCR	29.74	31.9	-2.566	$p = .013$	d= -.316
PGWBI	41.54	58.28	-6.998	$p < .001$	d= -.861
RFQ-C	0.64	0.69	-1.169	$p = .247$	d= -.144
RFQ-U	0.89	0.76	-2.398	$p = .019$	d= -.295
USEI-Index	48.2	51.85	-3.868	$p < .001$	d= -.476
USEI- Behavioural	15.26	16.71	-3.771	$p < .001$	d= -.464
USEI- Emotional	15.12	15.92	-1.962	$p = .054$	d= -.242
USEI- Cognitive	17.82	19.21	-3.533	$p = .001$	d= -.435
GC- Engagement	4.39	5.12	-6.734	$p < .001$	d= -.829
GC-Avoidance	2.55	2.46	-.838	$p = .405$	d= -.103
GC-Conflict	0.87	0.80	-.727	$p = .470$	d= -.089

#### 4. Discussion

This study showed a significant improvement in all the variables under study: a) certainty about mental states moderately increased along the counselling process, and uncertainty about mental states decreased significantly; b) psychological well-being index significantly improved, although signalling still a severe distress; c) students' academic engagement increased significantly both in terms of overall index and in terms of dimensions, excepted for emotional engagement, which increased, but not significantly; d) students' academic success improved significantly; and, finally e) there was a significant improvement in positive group climate in terms of group members' engagement, while avoidance and conflict decreased non significantly.

Regarding RFQ findings, it is interesting to note that, before enrolling in the counselling, the students presented RF scores which suggest a previous tendency to hypomentalize, namely the sample presented a quite high score on RFQ-U. This may imply that the students participating

in the counselling previously showed difficulties in interpreting behaviours in terms of their and others' mental states, namely they presented very poor and simplistic models of mind. Thus, the significant decrease of uncertainty dimension, which reflect hypomentalizing, may be considered an indicator of the counselling efficacy in allowing the students to interpret their behaviours on the basis of intentional mental states. Nevertheless, as far as concerns the results on the RFQ-C (that increased but not significantly), we can hypothesize that the online NMP was more effective in supporting students in developing some models of mind, rather than in reducing their tendency to hypermentalize, namely the rigidity and inaccuracy of the already existent students' models of mind (that was reflected in the certainty dimension). On one hand, it is plausible to assume that the work on the individuals' inaccuracy and rigidity of models of mind requires much more time and that is difficult to reach due to the short length of the counselling. On the other hand, these findings may be connected to the RFQ specificity and to the definition of hypermentalizing and its "deceptive nature" (Bateman & Fonagy, 2019; Jańczak, 2018). In this perspective, hypermentalization may appear to be a very complex and ambiguous construct that can be difficult to investigate using self-report measures (Jańczak, 2021).

Regarding PGWBI findings, it is important to underline that, before the counselling, the students presented a severe level of distress which reflected a high degree of suffering and discomfort related to their ineffective academic performance. As shown, there was a significant improvement of the participating students, although in the post-test phase distress levels were still severe. In this perspective, we may argue that the online group counselling was effective in reducing psychological distress, although it did not foster a shift towards non-distress levels.

In addition, the results showed that also the academic performance significantly improved in the post-test phase, showing that there was a parallel improvement of mentalization, psychological well-being and academic performance. Despite the analyses do not allow us to delineate causal relationship among the variables, it is possible to hypothesize that the improvements in RF and in perceived levels of psychological well-being may have had a positive impact on the students' academic performance. Specifically, we may imagine that, assuming a more genuine mentalizing perspective and taking a more agentic perspective towards the future may have influenced the students' perception of being more capable of implementing behaviours to achieve developmental academic objectives. As stated in the literature, improvements in mentalization produce a spontaneous sense of being in control of one's own actions, of responsibility for one's own choices and the relative feeling of being able to direct one's behaviours for purposes relevant to the self (Schimansky et al., 2010). We could argue that

this sense of agency influenced positively the psychological well-being of students and their academic engagement, which in turn impacted positively on the academic performance.

Comparing the results found in this study to the ones found in the f2f setting (Esposito et al., 2020b), we observed for the RF and for the academic performance similar trends in the two formats. Regarding psychological well-being, we observed that both samples presented similar levels of severe distress at the beginning of the counselling, but only in the f2f format these levels of distress reduced to a level of non-distress. We can argue that online sample's distress levels may not be just related to the condition of being students with academic difficulties and relational issues, but they may have been influenced also by the COVID-19 pandemic situation, during which the counselling was held. PGWBI items are, in fact, intended to measure general psychological well-being, not specifically academic psychological well-being; thus, we believe that the scores reflected a general distress that was not addressed only by academic difficulties.

Regarding USEI results, contrarily to our expectations, we found that at the beginning of the counselling students reported medium-high levels of academic engagement, both for the overall index and each dimension. On this regard, we may argue that the contingency related to COVID-19 anti-contagion instructions, that required the closing of several pivotal environments for students along with the educational one, and the social distancing may have impacted on students' academic engagement. More specifically, the formative agencies were very quick to reorganize themselves switching to the online learning. Therefore, university could much more easily re-enter students' daily lives with almost no interruption and provide a continuity with the context. In a period of great uncertainty and of massive preoccupation for one's own health, the academic context may have been a safety net for the students, who may have hyper-invested on their academic project and been strongly engaged, instead of withdrawing their investment in light of the contingency. Moreover, as suggest by the analysis, these levels of academic engagement improved significantly in the end, excepted for emotional engagement dimension. We may argue that the online group counselling mainly worked aiming at boosting the behavioural (action oriented to academic achievement) and the cognitive (effort and investment in learning activities and mastering of complex ideas and abilities) components of students' academic engagement.

Finally, Group Climate results showed unexpectedly that the NMP online group counselling fostered a positive group climate, with high levels of members' cohesion and self-disclosure (engagement dimension) and low levels of conflict and avoidance dimensions, both in pre and post-test phase. These results confirm the association between positive climate and good outcome in group interventions (Burlingame, McClendon & Strauss, 2002). Moreover, these

findings may suggest that this online group intervention may be characterized by a facilitated self-disclosure with low levels of avoidance and withdraw and high levels of group engagement, since the very first session. We may hypothesize that not being present in the same room at the same time may have reduced the awkwardness and the discomfort of getting to know each other. Moreover, the basic psychological need of connectedness and relation is somehow frustrated by the impossibility to meet in the same place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we may argue that in the virtual encounter with the others the fulfilment of this basic need may have gained the focus of the group work and, thus, the members' task of bonding have become central in group dynamics. Thus, the members, in the perspective of feel connected to the others, tended to share and participate more, withdraw and fight less.

Taken altogether, these findings suggested that the online NMP, similar to the f2f NMP, showed to be an effective tool to sustain and support students' academic experience.

## **5. Conclusions and Limitations**

This study highlighted the effectiveness of group counselling for university students in an online setting as a tool for promoting mentalization, psychological well-being, academic engagement and performance, showing that its efficacy is similar to the f2f setting. This finding may be linked to the positive group climate that the students perceived during the intervention, which support the relevance of a positive group climate for group interventions' efficacy. Nevertheless, we could also argue that online group interventions could be both a temporary solution and complementary format for students. In fact, the compelled changes due to COVID-19 pandemic posed the group counselling to face more complex situations and more severe challenges. However, in terms of psychological distress reduction, the online group counselling proved to be an effective tool of intervention, although not producing a shift from severe distress to non-distress levels. We may argue that 7 group sessions may have not been enough to intervene on students' distress during COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings of the current study might have some implications for clinical practice with university underachieving students. Within a Clinical Health Psychology perspective, it seems plausible to suggest that mentalizing online group interventions would be an effective intervention in increasing mentalization as a protective factor against environmental critical demands. These interventions may encourage emotional literacy and emotion regulation, and they may facilitate reflection on interpersonal relationship patterns, by showing students how these dimensions affect emotional expression and academic behaviours. With regard to RF, both f2f and online group counselling have shown to be effective in reducing hypomentalizing, but not hypermentalizing. This may be linked to the length of both format, which may not be



enough to impact on hypermentalizing, but it may also be connected to the specificity of the instrument to assess RF and to how hypermentalizing is indeed defined. We also hypothesize that this online group interventions have offered the possibility to students of contain and explore the emotional content related to the contingency of COVID-19 pandemic. This might have allowed them, in turn, to experience a reduction of severe levels of psychological distress, which are partially due to the “standard” condition of being university students with low performance, but also, and especially during the COVID-19 crisis, to the negative effects of social distancing and impossibility to access physically to the academic environments.

This study presents some limitations. The main limitation concerns whether our findings are causally related, e.g., that certain mentalization improvements within NMP group program facilitated an increase in the individuals’ psychological well-being and academic engagement, which in turn influenced their academic performances in a positive way. As this is not an experimental study, in future studies it is desirable to constitute a control group and test the assumptions about the relationships between variables. Moreover, we are not able to determine whether the changes have endured over time or if they were simply a product of a facilitating group environment. Future studies will take into account the analyses of subsequent follow-up sessions to observe if changes in RF, psychological well-being levels, academic engagement and academic achievement are consistent and persistent over time. Moreover, in a comparison perspective, future study could focus on a structured comparison between the two formats also regarding the academic engagement and the group climate, which were not objectives of the f2f study. Other limitations concern the small sample of this study; therefore, it is necessary to extend the sample in order to ensure that these results can be replicated in more groups. Finally, since the NMP assumes the key role of the group in promoting mentalization and psychological well-being, this study measured group processes in terms of group climate, but future studies will analyse such variable as possible moderator of the relationship between mentalization, psychological well-being, academic engagement and the academic performance. Moreover, we have no other assessment than pre and post-test phases and we have no other process measure, therefore, it would be difficult to speculate on what happened in the process between the first and the seventh session, and if really in these online group members avoided the conflict to gain the feeling of being involved in a caring relationship with others.

### **Informed Consent Statement**

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, RP, upon reasonable request.

**Conflict of interest statement**

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

**Author Contributions**

GE, AC, MRDN and FP delivered the counselling and collected the data. RP analysed the data. GE, RP and GP interpreted the results and wrote the first draft of the paper. MFF revised the draft. All the authors approved the final draft of the paper.

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