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Teaching Intrapersonal Conflict: A Necessity in a Post COVID World

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Abstract

At the university level, mental health and mental illness education is still limited to clinical disciplines. However, Post COVID-19 mental health issues have become an epidemic that the university cannot ignore. Left alone to clinical disciplines, mental health issues appear as a health disturbance instead of a daily process of internal negotiations in need of acceptance and promotion. Indeed, the normalization of mental health can lead students to seek the required help with no fear of diagnosis stigma. By interviewing students and faculty about their mental health journey during COVID and Post-COVID 19, this paper proposes different spaces where the normalization of mental health can be integrated easily within Higher Education. One of the spaces alluded to in the paper is an inclusive language that incorporates neurodiversity mental illness. However, the main purpose of this focuses on intrapersonal conflict as a discursive space where teaching can become mindful.

Introduction

Mental health encompasses our overall well-being, including emotional, psychological, and social aspects, influencing our thoughts, feelings, and actions (CDC, 2023). In contrast, mental illness refers to specific conditions that affect cognition, mood, behavior, or emotions, such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia (CDC, 2023). While not everyone experiences a mental illness, most individuals encounter challenges related to their mental health. Efforts have been made to normalize mental health in university settings, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Housel, 2021; Reid, 2022). However, various challenges persist in fully normalizing mental health and illness.

The stigma surrounding mental health and illness can deter students from seeking help due to shame and societal stigma (Eproson, 2021; Smith & Applegate, 2018). Experts emphasize the importance of preventive measures rather than relying solely on reactive approaches provided by counseling centers (Fink, 2014). Furthermore, there are gaps in creating a supportive campus community for individuals with mental health disorders, impeding the normalization and inclusivity of mental health for faculty, students, and the overall campus community (Diplacito-DeRango, 2016). To address these challenges, this article focuses on establishing discursive spaces (Elmoudden, 2019) in higher education that destigmatize mental illness and promote help-seeking behavior (Greenwell, 2019).

One crucial discursive space for promoting the normalization of mental health is the use of inclusive language in syllabi, classrooms, and higher education communities. Stigmatizing language around mental health contributes

to prejudiced behaviors against individuals targeted by the stigma (Smith & Applegate, 2018). It is essential to upgrade our language to promote neurodiversity-inclusivity mental illness by avoiding terms like "crazy" to describe behaviors, "bipolar" to imply changing behaviors, or "commit" when referring to suicide. Discourses related to pills, therapy, funding, and mass shootings can also perpetuate the stigma surrounding mental health and illness, evoking fear, weakness, and danger (Smith & Applegate, 2018). While educators may not have control over these broader discourses, they can change the discourse within higher education itself.

Another significant discursive space is teaching conflict, which is integral to many humanities and social science classes. Conflict exists at various levels of human functioning and interactions and can lead to either destructive outcomes or positive social change and creativity (Katz, 1965; Kriesberg, 1998). While interpersonal, intergroup, and intercultural conflict are commonly addressed in communication studies, intrapersonal conflict, which relates to an individual's inner mental peace, is often overlooked. Teaching effective communication in conflicts involving multiple individuals is important, but it is equally crucial to help students understand and manage their own intrapersonal communication, as it impacts decision-making, mental health, and overall well-being. This paper advocates for the inclusion of intrapersonal conflict and its management as a vital aspect of humanities education, specifically in the field of communication studies, based on findings from a study conducted on 10 students in the NYC region regarding their understanding of mental health, stigma, and coping strategies.

The pursuit of inner peace is crucial for students to succeed in college and post-college life. However, the complexity of social issues and daily stresses often lead to moments of inner conflict and emotional issues (Gerasymova & Gerasimova, 2016). Social media, in particular, has been found to significantly impact students' mental health, with 91% of Gen Z students experiencing anxiety (Cigna, 2020; Moreno et al., 2011; Twenge, 2019). College staff members dedicate a significant portion of their time to addressing mental health concerns (Jaschik & Lederman, 2020), yet mental health conditions continue to rise within universities (Eisenberg, 2019; Reid, 2020).

Addressing students' mental health needs in higher education extends beyond teaching subject matter and encompasses the identification and management of internal conflicts. The increasing prevalence of mental health issues among students has prompted a call for the normalization of mental health in university settings (Housel, 2021; Reid, 2022). This paper contributes to the existing literature by examining the understanding of stigma, internal conflict, and strategies for mitigating them among students. The stigma surrounding mental health disproportionately affects BIPOC individuals, who often encounter inadequate treatment within healthcare facilities (Cobb, 2022; Eproson, 2021; Hudson & Kohn-Wood, 2002). Specifically, this paper focuses on the BIPOC student community at a university located in the central eastern region.

Literature Review (Stigmatizing Inner Peace or Mindfulness)

Conflict is commonly defined as an incompatibility of goals or "values between two or more parties, leading to antagonistic feelings and attempts to control each other" (Fisher, 1999, pg.4). Daniel Katz's typology from 1965 distinguishes economic, value, and power sources of conflict, wherein economic conflicts involve competing for

scarce resources, value conflicts arise from differences in beliefs and ideologies, and power conflicts occur when parties seek maximum control in interactions or societal settings. The manner in which conflict is handled determines whether it is constructive or destructive (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000).

Communication textbooks and classes typically include sections on conflict, regardless of the specific focus, such as intercultural, organizational, or interpersonal communication. Conflict is viewed as incompatibilities between parties that are constructed and sustained through verbal and non-verbal communication (Folger, Scott-Poole, & Stutman, 2021). Different levels of interpersonal interactions, such as intergroup conflicts, are explored, emphasizing the role of identities, group identities, stereotypes, prejudices, scapegoating, and discrimination during interactions (Putnam & Poole, 1987).

Organizational communication classes often discuss conflicts related to procedure or policy development within groups or organizations. On the interpersonal side, power dynamics in interactional relationships may be examined. Conflict resolution strategies, including win-lose, lose-lose, and win-win approaches, are commonly taught (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964). Instructors emphasize the importance of handling and managing conflict constructively to avoid destructive outcomes (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000).

This paper argues that addressing intrapersonal conflict is crucial for effectively handling communication conflicts. Intrapersonal conflict involves emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and values, contributing to self-awareness, perception, and individual expectations. Developing self-understanding and self-empathy can reduce both intra- and interpersonal conflicts. The focus of this paper is on mental health associated with inner peace and intrapersonal conflict. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the significance of inner peace, leading to the suggestion that humanities and communication studies should incorporate intrapersonal conflict alongside other types of conflict to help students achieve inner peace and succeed in the post-pandemic era.

The issue of intrapersonal conflicts and their impact on students' success in higher education is particularly important, given the increasing internal conflicts in students' lives. Factors such as social media, diverse family structures, and societal challenges like climate change may contribute to heightened inner conflicts. While opinions differ on whether the "Gen Z" generation is inherently affected or if increased mental health awareness has made these issues more apparent, it is clear that the so-called "I-generation" requires support in addressing intrapersonal conflict (Twenge, 2019). Research indicates that teaching conflict at different communication levels helps students effectively navigate conflict situations (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2014; Wilmot & Hocker, 2011). However, there is limited knowledge regarding the value of teaching students how to deal with intrapersonal conflict associated with mental health to attain inner peace. This paper aligns with the advocacy of communication scholars who call for normalizing mental health within the university (Housel, 2021; Reid, 2022).

The increasing prevalence of intrapersonal conflicts among students poses a significant concern for their success in higher education. Given the current societal landscape, including the impact of social media, family structures, and issues like climate change, it is evident that the I-generation requires assistance in managing their intrapersonal conflict. This is particularly reflected in the characterization of this generation as the anxious generation (Cigna,

2020). While teaching conflict resolution skills in communication

Method

Upon obtaining approval from the institutional review board, a sample of 10 undergraduate students from a mid-size university in New York (NY) was selected for interviews conducted over Webex. The choice of Webex was made for its additional security measures. Only aggregated data was collected to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the students. The diversity of the student population in NY provided an advantageous opportunity for the sample. Among the participants, three identified as white, one as Asian, and two as African American, while the majority came from South Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds.

The interviews followed a qualitative, semi-structured approach, allowing students to freely express their thoughts (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). The sample consisted of 4 male students, 5 female students, and one unreported gender. The students represented various majors and ages within the Gen Z range of 18-22. Data analysis was conducted using thematic categories derived from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interview questions focused on understanding the students' experiences with mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic periods, as well as their perspectives on what professors and the university can do to provide support.

Results

Three themes were identified from this study: identifying mental inner peace, stigmatizing mental inner peace, and teaching mental inner peace.

Identifying Mental Inner Peace

“There is no success without inner peace,” says one of the students when asked about emotional upheavals during class coursework. Some of the students related internal conflict based on thoughts, emotions, ideas, values and predispositions as a struggle between what they “want to do” and what they “should do.” Not being able to identify intrapersonal conflicts give rise to anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. “Recognizing and strengthening one’s own values and norms, as well as owning up to and dealing with one’s unresolved anger from the past, whether justified or not, is helpful in creating inner peace,” says another student. Another male student says, “Perhaps if my depression was more recognized and accepted by my teachers and the university. Perhaps, my inner peace would have been saved and I might not have just left the university thinking I am a bad student.”

Another student mentioned that “I can be present talking to you, but in my brain I am saying all horrible things to myself.” While discussing inner peace students seem to make correlations between mental health and intrapersonal conflict. The inability of acquiring inner peace in these experts seem to lead to mental health issues, which lead to intrapersonal conflict. Nevertheless, the opposite is correct where intrapersonal conflict associated with lack of inner peace, leads to mental health issues as this excerpt shows.

“Sometimes it is hard for me to understand why I am having so many different negative thoughts in my mind.” This student is not alone, wondering thoughts and most of them are negative thoughts and are part of negative emotions daily (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010, Kuppens, Realo, & Allik, 2010). However, being able to detect negative thoughts and replacing them with positive ones may increase inner peace and mental health wellness in general. Exploring how a youth’s mental health is influenced by their perceived meaning in life can greatly enhance our understanding of youth functioning, engagement, and coping during and after socio-political conflicts (Chang et al., 2021).

Stigmatizing Mental Inner Peace

The perception that students may have about ignoring intrapersonal conflict may come from the stigma about mental health they encounter prior to entering university, such as that found in their family, previous educational institutions, culture, and society as a whole. This stigma against mental health can take the form of ostracization of those who are considered "less" (Smith & Applegate, 2018), as well as blaming individuals who deal with mental health issues (Craig & More, 2020; Eperson, 2021; Cobb, 2022). “Relatives made fun of me about my weight loss and gains”; explains one of the students about her binge eating struggles. Another female student added that her anorexia and binge eating at times became a joke of cousins, siblings, and different family members instead of helping her disturbing her inner peace. Eating disorders involves extreme dieting or exercising based on unhealthy relationships with food to appease emotions, attitudes, and behaviors (NAMI, 2022).

In the above excerpts, according to these students, the unresolved intrapersonal conflicts about family resentment lead to mental health issues associated with depression and anxiety. But such issues come in forms of cultural stigma as well. For example, Abdel-Khalek and Lester (2018) found that different challenges to mental health issues exist for students who belong to minoritized religions. Such an indication collaborates this research. One of the students, referring to themselves as a Brown Muslim Student, states, “For instance, in my own culture, stigma has led people to ignore their inside conflicts and shy away from talking about my mental inner peace. Even when they have inside conflicts they refrain from seeking outside help or going to therapists.” Another student who is catholic mentions, family and other member of the society tell people who may struggle to “just get up and just pray more for peace.”

Such excerpts point out that a focus on culture and stigma is significant as different cultures bring forth different stigmas from within, towards, and about the culture, which in itself lead different students to ignore intrapersonal conflict and refuse to seek help when their mental inner peace is challenged and their intrapersonal conflict is increased. Identifying ways of helping students promote awareness of mental health is paramount to the development of practices by which students can self-disclose their own intrapersonal conflicts, leading to better mental health and inner peace.

Teaching Mental Inner Peace

When discussing inner peace, students expressed a desire to learn how to decrease intrapersonal conflict. They

asked about coping mechanisms they could use in class and noted that classes where professors pay attention to mental health issues are more effective for them. Some mentioned that certain professors provide extra credit for meditation, which they found to be more helpful than additional busy work, as it allows them to rest their minds and increase inner peace.

One student suggested that "making the day about mental health awareness workshops" would be beneficial, while another proposed that professors should include ways to deal with inner conflicts in their course material. Another student recommended changing the syllabus to incorporate issues of mental health that can help mitigate conflicts within oneself. In general, students felt that to be successful as a student in today's world, they need to learn about self-talk, affirmations, and meditation in addition to their regular coursework in order to gain inner mental peace and better cope with intrapersonal conflicts.

In essence, students are seeking ways to not only understand their inner conflicts, but also resolve them. It's clear that their focus is not just on learning different subjects in general or topics about conflict in particular in higher Ed, but on effective ways to manage conflict. Just as we teach resolution techniques in organizational communication or praxis in intercultural communication (such as dialogue, reflection, action, and positionality) (Sorrells, 2022), or according to the Ralph Kilmann's Conflict Mode Instrument of interpersonal conflict communication that includes (competition, avoidance, accommodation, compromise, and collaboration), teaching students about mindfulness, meditation techniques, and affirmations is crucial for their success in university classes.

Discussion

Teaching conflict resolution in humanities and communication studies plays a crucial role in preparing students for their professional and social lives both during and after graduation. Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human relationships (Fisher, 1999), and by equipping students with the knowledge and skills to understand and effectively manage conflict, we can enhance the satisfaction and productivity of their social interactions. While the study excerpts primarily focused on the discussions related to inner peace and the destigmatization of mental health in higher education, it is important to emphasize that addressing intrapersonal conflict is equally vital for improving overall satisfaction and inner peace. The students' perspectives highlighted the need for integrating inner peace and mental health considerations into the curriculum.

Existing literature on interpersonal conflicts suggests that destructive patterns of adaptation can emerge, including life crises, social and psychological deviations (Donchenko & Titarenko, 1989), and age-related crises (Kon, 1984). Intrapersonal complications, such as intrapersonal conflict and crisis (Antsupov & Malyshev, 1996), are also characteristic of interpersonal conflicts. As indicated by students in the above excerpts, without inner peace, there is no interpersonal success. Intrapersonal conflict is considered a psychological phenomenon indicating disruptions in a person's socio-psychological adaptation (Gerasimova & Gerasimova, 2016). Theoretical analysis has identified six psychological models of intrapersonal conflict: psychoanalytic, cognitive, humanistic, role, age, and motivational-and-semantic (Lozhkyn & Povyakel, 2000).

While intrapersonal conflict may be addressed in clinical classes, it is crucial to acknowledge that the current generation faces elevated levels of anxiety and less inner peace compared to previous generations as the discussion of the excerpts above indicate. Thus, teaching about intrapersonal conflict and resolution alongside conflict resolution in communication studies can be beneficial. Adaptive thinking is essential in navigating post-COVID-19 intrapersonal conflicts. Introducing mental health discussions in the classroom can support students' well-being. As evident from the perspectives shared by various students, there is a clear demand for such inclusive and constructive suggestions.

Although it may be challenging for instructors from non-psychological or neuroscience disciplines to focus on mental health, they can acknowledge the limitations of cognitive psychology and explain that this topic is beyond the scope of class discussion. Instead, intrapersonal conflict can be used to illustrate the importance of inner peace and its potential to promote healthier interactions in interpersonal or other types of conflicts. This study provides insights based on students' perspectives, including resolutions such as engaging the five senses, deep breathing, meditation, active listening, seeking understanding, and practicing self-empathy.

Conclusion

This analysis contributes to the existing literature on the emerging advocacy for mental health teaching in higher education. The approach taken in this study involves creating discursive spaces within classroom settings to discuss mental health as an integral part of students' overall university education for success, encompassing both external knowledge and inner peace. Using inclusive language within the university community and classrooms is one way to achieve this goal. Relating this to intrapersonal conflict directly addresses students' inner peace. Teaching students how to attend to their inner peace can enhance their overall educational success and facilitate their reintegration into society, supporting the call for preventive measures rather than solely relying on reactive measures from counseling centers (Fink, 2014).

There are two significant limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. Firstly, out of the 10 participants, only one identified as white, one as Asian, one as Latinex, and one as African American. The majority of the participants were from South Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds. This underrepresentation of participants from other ethnic groups may have influenced the study's findings. While research on mental health among white individuals is extensive, more discussions and advocacy are needed for African Americans and other marginalized communities (Craig & More, 2020; Eperson, 2021; Cobb, 2022). Secondly, the majority of the participants were recruited from one university. Expanding the study to include participants from different universities and disciplines would provide a more comprehensive analysis.

Recommendations

- Embrace the Integration of Mental Health in Higher Education
- Emphasize the importance of incorporating discussions about intrapersonal communication and inner peace for a successful educational journey.

- Implement initiatives that normalize mental health and reduce stigma on campus by discussing mental health and illness in the classroom.
- Reduce stigma of mental health and mental illness by incorporating talks about intrapersonal conflict in the classroom
- Offer mental health awareness training for faculty and staff to better understand and support students' mental well-being.

Notes

It is important to note that the data presented in this article is part of a larger study focused on the normalization of mental health in higher education.

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