



Original Article

A study of the role of cognitive behavioral avoidance and diffuse avoidance style in prediction of adjustment to college with control of cognitive flexibility

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Abstract

Introduction: The aim of the present study was to investigate the role of cognitive behavioral avoidance and diffuse avoidance style in predicting of the adjustment to college with control of cognitive flexibility.

Materials and Methods: In a correlation study, 285 students of Allam-ol-Hodda complex of Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz city were selected via multistage cluster sampling method during the fall semester of the 2016-2017 academic year. The participants completed the items of Cognitive Behavioral Avoidance Inventory, Diffuse Avoidance Style Subscale, Cognitive Flexibility and Adjustment to College Questionnaire. To analysis the data, statistical methods of Pearson correlation coefficient and simultaneous multiple regression analysis were conducted through SPSS software version 22.

Results: The results showed that the total cognitive behavioral avoidance subscales and diffuse avoidance style subscale had a significant negative correlation with adjustment to college. Also there were positive correlation between cognitive flexibility and adjustment to college. Moreover simultaneous multiple regression analysis showed that cognitive behavioral avoidance and diffuse avoidance with control cognitive flexibility were able to predict 0.28 of variance of adjustment college scores.

Conclusion: Therefore, regarding to the important role of cognitive behavioral avoidance and diffuse avoidance style in reducing adjustment to college, concerning these variables as goals can be effective in predicting and reducing maladaptive behaviors in college environment.

Keywords: Adjustment, Cognitive behavioral avoidance, Diffuse avoidance style, Flexibility.

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Introduction

Nowadays, adaptation to college due to exposure to psychological and environmental stressors requires more attention, because adaptation to college affects other aspects of life such as mental health, performance, and academic motivation and adaptation in outside the college. Adapted students are those who, while gaining high grades, have sincere and reciprocal social communication with high psychological well-being, and can successfully complete their courses and ultimately graduate (1). According to Lubker and Etzel, there are many social pressures in college, including new human relationships, worries about the future, distance from the family, and housing in the campus, which can create adaptive problems; in order to be able to adapt to such situations, students use different cognitive and behavior strategies, some of which, like problem-centered, are adaptive, but some like avoidance style are considered as maladaptive (2). Cognitive avoidance includes mental strategies such as rumination, deliberate attempts to suppress thoughts, and attempt to separate distressing impulses from ourselves (3). Cognitive avoidance strategy seems to be the way people choose to deal with social events and interpersonal contacts to respond to stress conditions (4).

Behavior avoidance is an activity designed to avoid an internal or external stimulus that is difficult to deal with and this behavior avoidance leads to loneliness and reduced social support. Behavior avoidance involves postponing decisions, isolating, leaving homework and responsibilities before they are completed and losing opportunities (3). Research has shown that cognitive avoidance has a positive correlation with low psychological adjustment, anxiety and depression (3-7). According to Fester's report, repeated avoidance reduces the opportunity for positive reinforced social behaviors and activities, and in turn strengthens passivity and inactivity, which can have a negative impact on the individual's adaptation to external events. Also, avoiding behaviors or escaping the situations lead to limiting the individual's treasury, thus adversely affecting the individual's external environment (7).

In one study, Baker and Carson concluded that avoidance style is considered as less adaptive style because the methods and knowledge leading to it do not alter the stress or root

problem of the stress problem (8). Among the other factors affecting the students' adaptation to college and academic status are the evolutionary process of identity and the factors that affect it. The newest theory of identity is Bersonsky's Identity Styles Theory. He has presented three styles of identity: Information Identity Style, Normative Identity Style, and Diffuse Avoidance Style (9). Individuals with a Diffuse Avoidance style avoid interpersonal conflicts and use maladaptive and non-conforming decision making strategies (10,11). Usually, the performance of these individuals is weak on assignments and they leave the homework incomplete (12).

In another study, it was stated that the style of avoidance identity has a positive correlation with low psychological adaptation, low expectation of success and inappropriate performance at the college (13). Another psychological structure that is related to adaptation is Cognitive Flexibility. Cognitive Flexibility is considered as the ability to shift attention from subject to subject and change behavior after receiving feedback (14). In general, the ability to change cognitive sets in order to adapt to the changing impulses is the main element in the cognitive-flexibility relativism (15). Individuals with flexible thinking abilities use alternative justifications, positively rebuild their thinking frameworks, challenge situations or stressful events more easily, are more focused on the alternative methods for cognitive changes, thereby increasing their adaptation with the external environment (16,17).

Theoretically, the avoidance of maladaptive behaviors is likely to be contributing, because avoiding leads to retreat and isolation and does not solve the root problem. Also, the research somewhat confirms the positive correlation between cognitive flexibility and adaptation to the external environment, but since the role of cognitive-behavior avoidance and diffuse avoidance identity style with cognitive flexibility control has not been accurately predicted in the prediction of student adaptation to college, this study aimed to investigate the role of cognitive-behavior avoidance and avoidance identity style with cognitive flexibility control in predicting adaptation to college, so that due to lack of studies in this area and lack of attention to the role of cognitive flexibility as a control variable, more knowledge is obtained. Therefore, the present

study seeks to investigate whether cognitive-behavior avoidance and avoidance identity style can predict adaptation to college while controlling the role of cognitive flexibility?

Materials and Methods

The present research is a correlation study. The predictive variables in this research are cognitive-behavior avoidance and diffuse avoidance style, the criterion variable is adaptation to college and the control variable is cognitive flexibility. The criterion for choosing the control variable is the effect of this structure, along with the predictive variables on the criterion variable, based on previous research. Kerlinjer and Pedhazur discuss the control of the intervening variable so that the control in the regression is performed as follows: first, the control variable enters the equation, and then in the next step, the other independent variables are added to the equation. The difference between the variance explained by the control variable, the explained variance of all variables, indicates the control exercises (18). The statistical population of this study consisted of all undergraduate and postgraduate students who lived in Alam-ol-Hoda complex, affiliated to Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, in the academic year of 2016-17. From among all students according to Krejski and Morgan tables, 285 students were selected by cluster sampling method, so that 6 blocks were randomly assigned to 3 blocks and then the questionnaires were randomly distributed among 3 blocks. Criteria for entering the study include willingness to participate in the study, studying, absence of guest students or transfer, lack of serious and restrictive medical illness, which reduces the motivation to complete the questionnaires, that all criteria are based on individual statements and oral form. Exclusion criteria, lack of willingness to participate in research, lack of entry criteria for study based on individual statements, and incomplete completion of questionnaires. To maintain ethical principles, they were asked to refrain from mentioning their name and confidently answering questions with integrity. The results were analyzed using spss22.

Measurement tools in this research were:

A) *Cognitive-Behavior Avoidance Scale (CBAS)*: This scale has been designed and evaluated by Ottenbreit and Dobson to measure all kinds of avoidance coping, which has 31

points that are "not at all correct" on the "Likertly" scale (one), "to be honest about me" (five). The total range of scores is between 31 and 155 (19). This scale has four subscales of cognitive avoidance, cognitive avoidance, behavior avoidance, and social avoidance. There is also an internal correlation between the subscales of 0.39-0.59 (19). The total internal consistency and cognitive avoidance subscales, behavior avoidance, social avoidance and social cognitive avoidance were 0.91, 0.80, 0.75, 0.86, and 0.78 (20). The internal consistency of the Persian version of social avoidance and behavior avoidance subscales in a sample of 698 people in Iran was 0.84 and 0.89, respectively, and its retest reliability was 0.64 and 0.65 respectively (21). The formal and content validity of this tool was confirmed by five experts and the reliability of the test was obtained in the internal consistency with the Cronbach's alpha of 0.84, which is a desirable reliability (22). In the present study, reliability was obtained through Cronbach's alpha for the whole scale of 0.93.

B) *Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI)*: This questionnaire, developed by Denis and Vandural, is a short-term self-report tool that includes 20 questions and is used to measure the type of Cognitive Flexibility that is needed in the individual's success of the challenge and the replacement of ineffective thoughts with efficient thoughts (15). The method of scoring is based on a 7 degree Likert scale and tries to measure 3 aspects of cognitive flexibility: a) the desire to understand hard-to-control situations (controllability perception); b) the ability to understand several alternative justifications for human life events and behavior (perception of behavior justification), C: ability to create several alternative solutions for difficult situations (perception of various options). The researchers evaluated the reliability of the present questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha for the whole scale, perceived control and perception of various options respectively 0.91, 0.84, 0.91, and the re-test method was 0.81, 0.77, and 0.75 are obtained (15). Denis and Vandural in their research showed that the present questionnaire has an emotional structure, convergent validity, and concurrent narrative. The simultaneous validity of this questionnaire with Beck Depression Inventory (-0.39) and its convergence validity with Rabin and Martin's flexibility scale was 0.75 (15). In Iran, the coefficient of reliability of the whole

scale was 0.71 and the control subscales, perception of different options and perception of the justification of behavior were reported to be 0.55, 0.72, and 57.7 respectively (23). In this research, Cronbach's alpha for the whole scale, it was 0.70.

C) Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ): This tool was made by Baker and Siryk and has 67 articles (24). This scale is one of the few scales used to adapt to the position of the college. It also has 4 subscales of academic adaptation (24 items), social adjustment (20 items), personal-emotional adaptation (15 items), and attachment to the college. Be responsive on a five-level Likert scale (completely applies to me "5") until (does not apply to me at all "1") answers the questions to the questions. Four scores are calculated for component components and a total score (24).

This scale has been studied in numerous studies in terms of psychometric properties. In Baker's and Sirius's Alpha Cobb's study, all component components were above 80% (24). Latheir and Windham in their study obtained internal stability coefficients for component components between 0.89-0.95 (25).

This tool was translated into Persian by Mikaeili Mani and adapted by two professors of the English language and psychology with the original text in order to resolve its written and substantive problems (26). Mikaeili Mani achieved the coping scale of academic adjustment in a group of 90 students, 0.84, social adjustment 0.72, personal-emotional adaptation 0.69, attachment to college 0.91 and

total adaptation of 0.78 (26). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the whole scale was 0.88.

D) Diffuse Avoidance Style (DAS): In order to assess this identity style, Berezonky's Diffuse Avoidance Identity style subscale was used which included 10 questions (27). Questions on a Likert scale are graded from one to five. Berezonky's Cronbach's alpha coefficient reported this tool, which was implemented on 617 people, for a 0.76 diffuse avoidance identity style (27).

Moghanlou, Vafaei and Shahrarai in their research have reported the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the inner consistency of the avoidance subset -0.68 (28). In a research in Iran, the validity of the questionnaire was reported to be 0.73 (29). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency of subscales was 0.73.

Results

In this research, 285 questionnaires were distributed among the subjects. Out of these, 12 questionnaires were withdrawn from the process for non-return. Finally, 273 questionnaires were analyzed. The sample of this study was mostly male students aged between 19 and 23 years, with no significant difference in their viewpoints.

Table 1 shows the average and standard deviation of the variables studied. In this study, using correlation coefficient of Pearson, the correlation between the variables was calculated and the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Average and standard deviation of the studied variables

Variable	Number	Minimum	Maximum	Average	SD
Adaptation to college	273	73	331	196.82	32.52
Cognitive flexibility	273	56	119	92.66	13.96
Diffuse avoidance style	273	14	47	27.89	6.66
Cognitive- behavior avoidance	273	31	152	75.4	21.01
Social- behavior avoidance	273	8	40	19.79	6.55
Behavior avoidance	273	6	30	15.84	4.60
Cognitive avoidance	273	7	33	16.41	5.29
Cognitive- social avoidance	273	7	35	16.70	5.18

Table 2. Correlation matrix of predictive variables with adaptation to college

Variable	Correlation	Significance
Cognitive flexibility	0.226	≤0.001
Diffuse avoidance style	-0.412	≤0.001
Cognitive- behavior avoidance	-0.555	≤0.001
Social-behavior avoidance	-0.465	≤0.001
Behavior avoidance	-0.501	≤0.001
Cognitive avoidance	-0.457	≤0.001
Cognitive-social avoidance	-0.509	≤0.001

According to Table 2, there was a negative correlation between cognitive-behavior avoidance and adaptation to college ($r = -0.555$), which is significant at the level of $P \leq 0.001$. Also, there was a negative correlation between diffuse identity style and adaptation to college

($r = -0.412$), which is significant at $P \leq 0.001$. In addition, there was a positive correlation between cognitive flexibility and adaptation to college ($r = 0.226$), which is significant at $P \leq 0.001$.

Table 3. Regression analysis of criterion variable scores based on scores of predictive variables with simultaneous logging method

Model	R	R2	Reformed R	Standard Error of the Estimation	Durbin-Watson Test
Cognitive flexibility	0.226	0.051	0.048	31.74	---
Cognitive flexibility, Cognitive – behavior Avoidance and diffuse avoidance style	0.580	0.336	0.329	26.64	1.66

Multiple regression analysis was used to predict adaptation to college based on predestine variables. In multiple regression analysis in the same way in order to control the interventional variable, it is necessary first to analyze the control variable and then add the predestine variables. According to the contents of Table 3 in the first stage, the flexibility variable (control variable) can predict about 5% of variance of adaptation to college. In the second stage, when the Cognitive-behavior avoidance variables and the anonymous identity style enter into analysis, the predictive weight of both predictive variables together with the

cognitive flexibility variable is 33%, the difference between these two numbers is "0.28", which suggests that cognitive-behavior avoidance variables and diffuse avoidance identity style with cognitive flexibility control predict about 28% of variance in adaptation to college.

Table 4 or analysis of variance is related to the significance of correlation squared values. As shown in this table, the F ratio for the correlation squared ($r^2 = 0.366$) between prerequisite variables with adaptation to college is 45.4 and is significant at $P \leq 0.001$.

Table 4. Information on variance analysis

Model	Sum Squared	Degrees of Freedom	Average Score	F	p
Regression	14695.63	1	14695.63		
Remainder	273088.11	271	1007.7		
Total	287783.75	272			
Regression	96742.44	3	32247.481		
Remainder	191041.308	269	710.191		
Total	287783.75	272			

*Cognitive flexibility, cognitive-behavior avoidance, and diffuse avoidance style

Table 5. Predictive of adaptation to college on predictive variables (Regression coefficients of predictive variables)

Model	Not standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p
	B	The standard error	Beta		
Constant	148.063	12.91		11.467	≤0.001
Cognitive flexibility	0.526	0.138	0.226	3.819	≤0.001
Constant	248.801	15.14		16.42	≤0.001
Cognitive flexibility	0.228	0.12	0.098	1.897	0.059
Cognitive – behavior avoidance	-0.712	0.091	-0.460	-7.843	≤0.001
Diffuse avoidance style	-0.697	0.29	-0.143	-2.394	0.017

According to Table 5, the cognitive-behavior avoidance variable (beta=-0.460) and the diffuse avoidance identity style (beta=0.143) in the prediction of adaptation to college were inversely meaningful that cognitive-behavior avoidance had played a greater role in this prediction. In the first block of this table, the standard cognitive flexibility (control variable) is equal to 0.226, which indicates the simple correlation coefficient of this variable with the adaptation to college (the variable of the property), the relation here is positive and significant. In the next step, when the cognitive-behavior avoidance variable is entered into the analysis, the contribution of the cognitive flexibility variable is reduced to 0.098, which indicates the coefficient of the cognitive flexibility effect on the adaptation to college after controlling or eliminating the effect of the cognitive-behavior avoidance variable of cognitive flexibility and adaptation to college. Here, the correlation between cognitive flexibility and adaptation to college is not meaningful. Cognitive flexibility appears to be less important in a level of action with predestine variables in order to predict the criterion variable, and therefore its effect is reduced. In the second block, the value of 460.0 indicates the relation between cognitive-behavior avoidance and adaptation to college after controlling or eliminating the effect of the interventionist factor (cognitive flexibility) on the relationship between cognitive-behavior avoidance and adaptation to college, suggesting a negative correlation and significant cognitive-behavior avoidance with adaptation to college. In the last part of the second block, the specific

weight of the diffuse avoidance identity variable is equal to -14.33, which is the weight of the variable of the diffuse avoidance identity style after controlling or deleting the effects of the variables preceding the analysis which indicates a significant negative correlation between avoidance identity style and adaptation to college.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the role of cognitive-behavior avoidance and diffuse avoidance identity style in predicting adaptation to college by controlling "cognitive flexibility". In the present study, after controlling the cognitive flexibility, predictive variables were able to explain and predict 28% of the variance of the criterion variables. Also, the results of this study showed that cognitive-behavior avoidance and all its subscales have a negative and significant correlation with adaptation to college. In other words, with increasing cognitive-behavior avoidance, the levels of adaptation to college among students decreased which is consistent with earlier studies. To explain the above, it can be said that frequent avoidance of opportunities to reduce positive social behaviors and activities, while increasing passivity and inactivity, leads to loneliness and reduced social support, resulting in lower levels of adaptation. Also, the social cognitive avoidance subscale has the highest correlation with adaptation to college which was correlated with $r = -0.42$ for Baker and Carson (8). According to Baker and Carson, cognitive avoidance strategies are, in fact, the way people choose to deal with social events

and interpersonal contacts to respond to stressful situations, but these methods and cognitive results lead to a change in tension or the root solving of the problem is not tense and, as a result, their degree of adaptation is decreasing (8). In this study, there was a significant negative correlation between diffuse avoidance identity style and adaptation to college ($r = -0.42$), which is consistent with other studies (9-13).

Confused avoidant identity seems to have a kind of insufficiency of self-esteem in doing things, and their trust and hope are low, and therefore their educational goals are uncertain and the quality of their relationship is weak. Instead of solving the problem and coping with the position of the force, these people are trying to avoid it, and this repeated avoidance in the long run does not help solve the root problem and reduce the adaptation.

In the study of Seaton and Beaumont, the correlation between diffuse avoidance identity style and student adaptation ($r=-0.39$) was reported, which negatively affected the adaptation significantly (9). According to Seaton and Beaumont, strangers and avoidance people have a kind of self-developed concept that avoids accepting responsibility, lacks a particular orientation in life, and does not endeavor to explore and discover their own environment, and have consequences. In the long run, avoiding these people will reduce the levels of compliance (9). In addition to the above, in the present study, when cognitive flexibility was analyzed as a predictive variable apart from other predicate variables, there was a positive and significant correlation with the criterion variable, which is consistent with previous studies (15-18).

To explain the above, we can say that people who have the ability to think flexibly use alternative justifications, positively rebuild their thinking frameworks, and challenging situations or stressful events and they accept more flexibility and flexibility than people with no cognitive flexibility.

But in the next step, when the cognitive flexibility variable was introduced along with other predictive variables, its contribution to the explanation and prediction of the criterion variable was reduced. Cognitive flexibility seems to be less important in a level of action with predestine variables in order to predict the criterion variable, and therefore its effect is reduced, of course, the Watson camera test

confirms the independence of the observation. Therefore, the correlation between control variables and the criterion variables is not very strong, it seems logical with the introduction of predestine variables for analysis, the share of cognitive flexibility (control). In addition, reducing the standard coefficient of cognitive flexibility regression in the second stage, that is, after the arrival of predictive variables, indicates that all the cognitive flexibility is transmitted through the variables predicted to adapt to the college. However, in this analysis, the function of cognitive flexibility was considered as a control variable, but it was important to examine the status of this variable as an independent variable and predictive variables as mediator variables.

From the limitations of the present research, we can use self-report scales to increase the possibility of bias in responses. Another limitation is that the present study was based on a male student sample and there is a problem of non-generalization of female students and non-student samples, so future research can examine the relationship between female students and non-undergraduate students. Future research can also focus on identifying the intermediary variables that play a role in cognitive-behavior avoidance and diffuse avoidance identity style by adapting to the college.

Considering that the lack of adaptation to college may have negative effects on other aspects of life such as mental health and lead to the leaving college and dropping out, it is recommended that specialist counseling and interventional programs be provided at the centers and universities. It is proposed to improve the levels of adaptability, and it is suggested that students who need help who cannot adapt themselves to the campus's environment should be identified and provided with expert advice in this regard.

Conclusion

Therefore, according to the findings of this study, cognitive-behavior avoidance and diffuse avoidance identity style each have a significant role in reducing adaptation to college beyond cognitive flexibility. In this regard, it is necessary for the specialists involved in education to provide educational strategies and programs that try to familiarize students with the concept of avoidance and its consequences in order to increase the adaptation of students to the college.

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