

Research Paper

A Study on Cognitive Flexibility and Proactive Coping Among Day Scholars and Hostel Residents

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ABSTRACT

Hostellers are confronted with challenges such as parental absence, homesickness, minor or major cultural indifferences, differences in curriculum which may result in physical, psychological and social consequences that adversely affects academic performance. Student's cognitive adaptability, perceived control over the situation and coping of stressors plays a pivotal role in withstanding hardships. The ability to adapt to the changes by shifting their cognitive sets is called Cognitive Flexibility. Proactive Coping is a multidimensional approach to coping which includes the commitment to strive and facilitate growth. The study was conducted to examine how Cognitive Flexibility and Proactive Coping differ among day scholars and hostel residents, using a comparative research design. The variables were reported by self-administered questionnaires Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010) and Proactive Coping Inventory (Greenglass et al., 1999). The study samples included 220 young adults in college, from other cities and/or states and native residents. The sampling method used for the study was purposive sampling. Collection of data was made by google forms. The form collected data including the participant's socio-demographic details, Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI), and Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI). Results inferred that there exists no difference in the variables among the groups and both the groups account for higher level of cognitive flexibility and proactive coping.

Keywords: *Cognitive Flexibility, Coping, Proactive Coping, Hostellers, Day Scholars*

In a holistic approach, environmental characteristics endorses a crucial role in the educational engagement, performance and attainment of the college students. WHO states the societal determinants of health that greatly influences health equity in positive and negative ways, which includes education, working life conditions, housing, basic amenities, social inclusion, non-discrimination and access to affordable health care services. To deal with and adapt to the societal expectancy, individuals should possess certain enduring traits. These traits present opportunities to reduce risk by evaluating the person's

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perceived control over the situation, the adjustment of behaviour and mental thoughts as the environment demands.

Hostel residents are students who live away from their families, home and primary caregivers. People access academic needs by living in a premise that provides basic needs and other amenities. Hostellers comparatively allow high social interactions as they share their living areas and thus learn new experiences from their fellow mates. They get trained for teamwork, through helping, caring, sharing, and developing a sense of responsibility. (Rafique & Waseem, 2021). On a positive note, Mohta et al. (2020) state that they develop confidence, maturity and a level of independence. On the contrary, Jacob & Kaushik (2017) concluded that hostellers, who live independently, are subject to less parental control that can inhibit unhealthy behavior. They are more prone to poor eating habits, lack of sleep, or the acquisition of new habits, such as smoking or drug abuse. All these factors do not contribute positively to the development of a healthy lifestyle.

Native residents or day scholars are students who live in the same environment they grew up in, with their parents or primary care givers. Studies imply that both hostellers and day boarders are prone to develop psychological problems (Munir et al., 2016). The study includes assessing students from both the groups, hostel residents and day scholars on Cognitive Flexibility and Proactive Coping.

Cognitive Flexibility

Cognitive flexibility refers to the ability to switch between thinking about two different concepts or thinking about multiple concepts simultaneously. In animal model, cognitive flexibility generally refers to the ability to switch a behavioral response according to the context of a situation (Scott,1962). It is the readiness with which one can selectively responses, develops in a protracted manner and is compromised in several prevalent neurodevelopmental disorders. It is unclear whether cognitive flexibility arises from neural substrates distinct from the executive control network, or from the interplay of nodes within this and other networks. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines cognitive flexibility as “The capacity for objective appraisal and appropriately flexible action. Cognitive flexibility also implies adaptability and fair-mindedness. It varies during the lifespan of an individual. Researchers have more specifically described cognitive flexibility as the capacity to switch one’s thinking and attention between different tasks or operations typically in response to a change in rules or demands. For example, when sorting cards based on specific rules, children are considered cognitively flexible if they are able to successfully switch from sorting cards based on the colour of the object to sorting based on the type of object on the card.

In humans, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) shows that specific brain regions, including the prefrontal, anterior cingulate and posterior parietal cortices, and basal ganglia, are activated when a person engages in task-switching procedures that require cognitive flexibility (Leber et al., 2008). Studies conducted with people of various ages and with particular deficits have further informed how cognitive flexibility develops and changes within the brain. It enables an individual to work efficiently to disengage from a previous task, reconfigure a new response set, and implement this new response set to the task at hand. Greater cognitive flexibility is associated with favorable outcomes throughout the lifespan such as better reading abilities in childhood, higher resilience to negative life events and stress in adulthood, higher levels of creativity in adulthood, and better quality of life in older individuals. Despite the widespread repercussions of intact cognitive flexibility

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throughout development and into adulthood, rigorous examination of this construct has been elusive. Magnusson & Brim (2014), conceptualizes that it declines with age and often results in an inability to adapt to new situations and environments.

There are multiple assessments and instruments to measure Cognitive Flexibility quantitatively, which includes numerous performance-based measures such as the Stroop Color and Word Test (Golden 1975), Trail Making Test Part B (TMT; Reitan and Wolfson 1993), Wisconsin Card Sorting Test (WCST; Berg 1948), and a limited number of self-report measures such as the Alternate Uses Test (Wilson et al. 1975), Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson et al. 1982) and Cognitive Flexibility Scale (CFS; Martin and Rubin 1995). Dennis & Wander Val (2009), developed Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI) a self-report questionnaire, after reviewing that the other measures are time consuming to administer and score, prone to practice effects, and/or require interactive relationships between test administrator and test taker. Three aspects of cognitive flexibility were hypothesized by Dennis & Wander Val (2009), (a) the tendency to perceive difficult situations as controllable; (b) the ability to perceive multiple alternative explanations for life occurrences and human behaviour; and (c) the ability to generate multiple alternative solutions to difficult situations.

Proactive Coping

Many basic dimensions of coping have been made in research which includes instrumental, attentive, vigilant, or confrontative coping, as opposed to avoidant, palliative, and emotional coping. Another conceptual distinction has been suggested between assimilative and accommodative coping, whereby the former aims at modifying the environment and the latter at modifying oneself (Brandtstädter, 1992). A new focus in the research of positive psychology, proactive coping, is the process of anticipating potential stressors and acting in advance either to prevent them or to mute their impact (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). There need not be any past harm, loss or threat, rather there are perceived challenges in the far future. Schwarzer and Taubert (2002) postulates that coping becomes goal management instead of risk management. Individuals are not reactive, but proactive in the sense that they initiate a constructive path of action and create opportunities for growth. Individuals who score high on proactive coping are known to be resourceful, responsible and principled, depends vastly on the individual rather than the environment. Proactive coping is characterized by an active response to environmental challenges, it is that there is a positive correlation between proactive coping and sympathetic reactivity. (Koolhaas et al., 2010). Experiments in proactive and reactive coping show that the proactive animal acts primarily on the basis of previous experience, i.e., feed-forward control. The reactive coping animal tends to rely more on the detailed accounts of the environment, i.e., it reacts. This fundamental difference in behavioral control also relates to the adaptive character of the two coping styles. A proactive coping animal may be adapted to stable environmental conditions. (Koolhaas et al., 2010).

Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI) by Greenglass et al. (1999), provides a multi-dimensional research instrument assessing coping through seven dimensions, which are Proactive coping, reflective coping, strategic planning, preventive coping, instrumental support seeking and emotional support seeking. Proactive Attitude Scale (Schwarzer, 1999), 15 items which assess attributes such as resourcefulness, responsibility, values and vision, believes rich potential of changes that can be made to improve oneself and one's environment.

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Dwivedi & Rastogi (2017), analysed how time perspective and proactive coping strategies influence the life satisfaction of emerging adults. The findings presented that it is important for a counsellor to deal with mental health of college students to evaluate the coping style and Time perspective of students who present with symptoms of anxiety, or stress. The counsellor should also facilitate the understanding of students of how using certain maladaptive strategies for cope with challenging situation deteriorate their happiness and well-being. As a support to the literatures the present study provides information on mental health enhancing aspects, proactive coping and cognitive flexibility among college students.

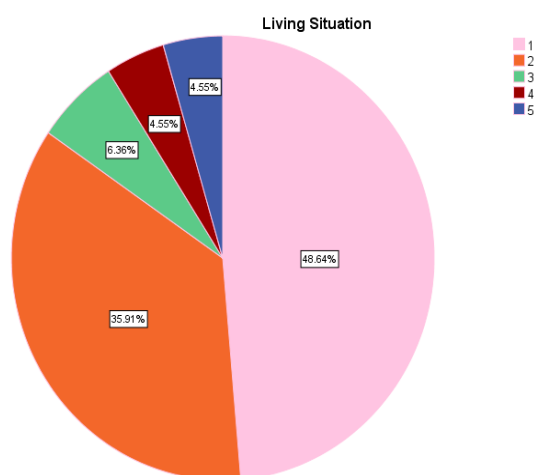
Biopsychosocial aspect

The variables under study are cognitive flexibility and proactive coping, which we bring under the biopsychosocial aspect by taking the following things into account.

- Cognitive flexibility and proactive coping enhance the positive aspect of mental health, it serves as a health promoting practice within the students that employs well-being and growth within every individual. Emotional connection, regulation and management.
- Positive affect mediated by increased level of dopamine in the frontal cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex, increases flexibility and creativity. (Ashby et al. 1999). Neurobiological mechanisms cause individual variations that underlie the behavioral expression of flexible coping styles presented by Coppens et al. (2010).
- Social approaches come into effect here, as we perceive, our habits and behaviors are influenced mostly by the societal, cultural, environmental factors we grow up in.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a comparative research design by which it examines Cognitive Flexibility and Proactive Coping as it exists within two groups, namely hostel residents and day scholars. A non-equivalent group design, a condition under which differences between two groups are on the phenomenon has been studied.



The study collected data through google forms using self-reported questionnaires, an easy and efficient mode of reaching a large number of potential respondents. The participants of the study were young adults aging from 18 to 25 pursuing a college degree of under graduation, postgraduation or other. Participants selected were hostellers and day scholars. The number of participants was 220, of which 107 account for students living at home and 112 account for students living away from home, classified as Native (1), Hostel (2), Apartment (3), with relatives (4), and alone (5). This is represented in figure 1.

Figure 1.

The samples were collected through convenient sampling method. Socio-demographic variables were collected and the following measures were used. There wasn't any deception or any other forms of control groups involved. Participants of the study gave informed consent before getting involved in the study. At any point a participant was free to leave and

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the researcher's information and contact details are provided alongside the google form to elucidate any doubts or suggestions from the participants. The data collected from the various participants were recorded and documented in the excel sheet. The data was coded and we used SPSS software to analyse the data.

Measures

Cognitive Flexibility Inventory was measured by a 20-item scale, Cognitive Flexibility inventory (CFI) developed by Dennis and Vander Wal (2009), a practical performance-based measure. The inventory consists of two subscales, Alternative subscale (13 items) measuring the ability to perceive multiple alternative explanations for life occurrences and human behaviour; and the ability to generate multiple alternative solutions to difficult situations and Control subscale (7 items) measuring the tendency to perceive difficult situations as controllable. Research indicated that the CFI has a reliable two-factor structure, good to excellent internal consistency, and high 7-week test-retest reliability. It uses a 7-point Likert scale to indicate the extent to which the participant agrees or disagrees. 1- strongly disagree to 7- strongly agree. Reverse scoring is applied for selective items (2, 4, 7, 9, 11, & 17) and then summing the numerical values to obtain total score.

The items were evaluated by content validity analysis and concluded that it required a sixth-grade reading ability. Cronbach's alpha for CFI indexed to be .90 and .91. Bivariate correlations conducted across Time 1 and Time 2 indicated high 7-week test-retest reliability for the CFI ($r = .81$; $p < .001$). Convergent construct validity was evidenced by significant correlations between CFS. As indicated by Dennis and Vander Wal (2009), higher scores were intended to be indicative of greater cognitive flexibility, which was predicted to be associated with greater cognitive adaptability when encountering stressful situations. Lower scores were intended to be indicative of greater cognitive rigidity, which was predicted to be associated with less cognitive adaptability when encountering stressful situations. The total score can range between 20 and 140.

Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI) developed by Greenglass et al. (1999), is a multi-dimensional research instrument that consists of 7 sub-scales and 55 items. Out of that Proactive Coping scale, consisting of 14 items, measures proactive coping exclusively. The responses are based on how the participant would react to various situations and indicate how true it is of them. It uses a 4-point scale with alternatives as, 1 is assigned to "not at all true, 2 to "barely true", 3 to "somewhat true" and 4 to "completely true". The reverse scored items are 2,9,14. Range of scores- 14 to 56.

It combines autonomous goal setting with self-regulatory goal attainment cognitions and behaviour. The scale has high internal consistency as seen in reliability measures (α) of .85 and .80 in the two samples of the study. In addition, the scale shows good item-total correlations and acceptable skewness as an indicator of symmetry around the mean. A principal component analysis confirmed its factorial validity and homogeneity.

Aim

- To investigate the level of cognitive flexibility among college students
- To investigate the level of proactive coping among college students
- To find whether the variables differ among students living in home and away from home

Significance of the study

The study provides insight on the students’ level of adaptability of cognitive conditions and the ability to anticipate, accept and cope with hurdles. The findings will aid in future research and help in finding the causality of existing knowledge, and provide knowledge on a localized aspect of the wide range of population. It facilitates empirical learning and contributes to the field of research on students, late adolescents, and young adults.

Hypotheses

- There is no significant difference in Cognitive Flexibility among Day scholars and Hostel residents.
- There is no significance difference in Proactive Coping among Day scholars and Hostel residents.

RESULTS

Table 1 reports the frequency and percentage of each categories including, age, gender, academic status, living situation, and part-time work. Students living in home account for 48.6% of the total sample and various living situations like hostel residents, students living with relatives, friends, and alone account for 51.4% of the sample.

Table 1

	n	%
Age (years)		
17	12	5.5
18	62	28.3
19	31	14.2
20	40	18.3
21	41	18.7
22	20	9.1
23	4	1.8
24	6	2.7
25	3	1.4
Gender		
Female	132	60
Male	88	40
Academic status		
UG	153	69.5
PG	67	30.5
Living Situation		
Home	107	48.6
Away from home (Hostel, Apartment, with Relatives, Alone)	113	51.4
Part-time work		
Working students	33	15.0
Non-workers	187	85.0

Table 2 outlines the mean value of Cognitive Flexibility for students living in home and away from home. Mean ± SD of the Cognitive Flexibility aggregate of students living at home is 91.09±15.483, and for students living away from home is 90.72±14.313. The comparison of mean scores indicates a barely accountable difference indicating higher

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Cognitive Flexibility among students living in Home. Similarly, the value of mean \pm SD for proactive coping was 40.34 ± 6.169 for students living at home and 39.45 ± 6.125 for students away from home, which did not differ in a statistically significant manner.

Table 2

Variables	N	Mean	SD
Cognitive Flexibility			
Home	107	91.08	15.483
Away from home	112	90.72	14.313
Proactive Coping			
Home	107	40.34	6.169
Away from home	112	39.45	6.125

Pearson correlation between the variables Cognitive Flexibility and Proactive Coping showed significance at 0.01 level represented in Table 3.

Table 3

	r value (with Proactive coping)	r value (with Cognitive flexibility)
Cognitive Flexibility	.534	
Proactive Coping		.534

Figure 2 and 3 shows the Q-Q plot of Cognitive Flexibility and Proactive Coping.

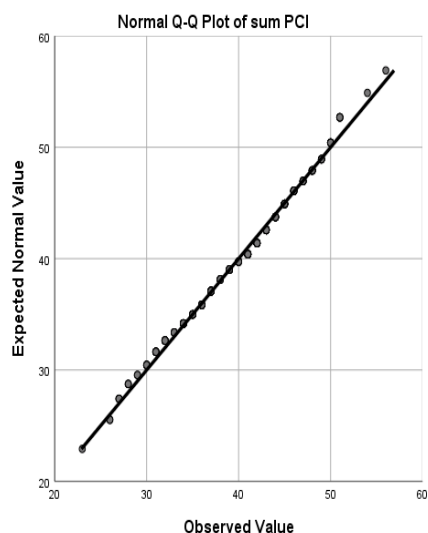


Figure 2

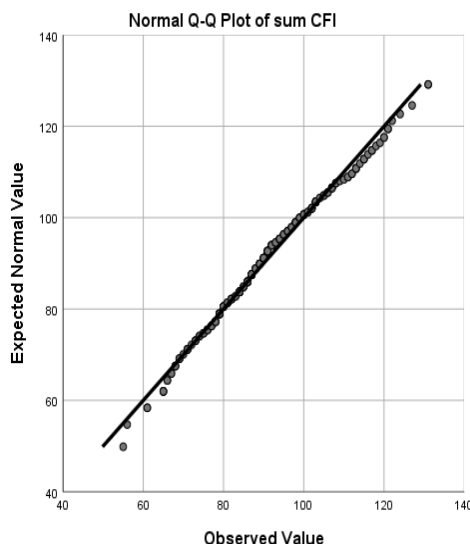


Figure 3

Table 4 shows the independent sample t-test results in Cognitive Flexibility between Gender, Academic Status, and Working Status.

Table 5 shows the independent sample t-test results in Cognitive Flexibility between Gender, Academic Status, and Working Status.

Table 4

Variables	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Cognitive Flexibility					
Gender					
Male	88	90.26	15.681	-.873	.472
Female	132	92.05	13.576		
Academic Status					
UG	153	89.84	14.069	-1.710	.042
PG	67	93.55	16.371		
Working Status					
Part-time	33	86.61	14.250	-1.840	.441
Not working	187	91.74	14.879		

*p<0.05

Table 5

Variables	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Proactive Coping					
Gender					
Male	88	39.73	6.322	.349	.900
Female	132	40.02	6.044		
Academic Status					
UG	153	39.79	6.091	-.414	.940
PG	67	40.16	6.302		
Working Status					
Part-time	33	39.33	6.494	-.578	.583
Not working	187	40.01	6.093		

*p<0.05

Table 6 shows the ANOVA results between Cognitive Flexibility, and Socio-economic status, and area of living.

Table 6

Variables	Sum of squares	F	p
Cognitive Flexibility			
Socio-Economic Status	499.026	1.130	.325
Living Situation	566.798	.637	.637

*p<0.05

Table 7 shows the ANOVA results between Proactive Coping, and Socio-economic status, and area of living.

Table 7

Variables	Sum of squares	F	p
Proactive Coping			
Socio-Economic Status	92.186	1.224	.296
Living Situation	142.276	.941	.441

*p<0.05

DISCUSSION

The study evaluated the adaptability of college students to the changing environmental stimuli and goal-oriented, problem-focused coping abilities among two groups, hostellers and day-scholars. It adopted two variables, in which both highlights aspects of mental health in a holistic manner, engaging biopsychosocial well-being. The results state that the relationship between cognitive flexibility with respect to the place of living of the student to be statistically non-significant. Proactive coping among two groups resulted in insignificant difference. Although on a positive note, the mean score of students living at home and at hostel, were found to be nearly equal, 91.08 and 90.72, respectively. The minimum score of the group is minimum 55 and maximum 131. The mean scores represent a normative high presence of cognitive flexibility in both groups. The minimum score for proactive coping was 23 and maximum score 56, resulted in a mean score of 40.34 in students living at home and 39.45 in students living away from home, indicating that the students of both groups take initiative to reframe, accept and cope with challenges rather than reacting to the stressors that has already occurred.

Reviewing and researching positive aspects of mental health in college students, hostellers and day scholars has been widely practiced. One similar study by Anthony & Mol (2017), examined the effect of self-concept on happiness and resilience in undergraduates, found that there is no difference in the level of happiness and resilience among two groups and both groups have moderate level of self-concept. Differences in academic progression in studies done by Jacob & Kaushik (2017), with respect to health status found that the study habits of both group of students remained the same on multiple dimensions but health progression was better in day scholars. The current study resembles these results on specific dimensions, while highlighting higher levels of Cognitive Flexibility among both groups, as seen in Table 2. The findings of Neupert et al. (2022), suggest that there is tremendous value in teaching young people how to engage in proactive coping. The study stressed on extending the education to college students, younger adults who are at a key developmental period, present research has its share in reducing the ignorance on the need of coping strategies. Resilience, reactive coping, and Proactive Coping has been incorporated as a dual-pathway model, to be conceptualised as a dynamic process used to positively adapt to stress over time and thrive during adversity. (Butler et al. 2021). Students have a modest level of self-concept, fundamentally aiding for resilience and coping strategies, which we can equate with nearly high levels of proactive coping, suggesting that on mean level, students can equally anticipate trouble and take steps to deal with it. Samples had an opportunity to learn more about their patterns of thought, reactivity, acceptance, and cognitive shifts indirectly and a chance to minimize or maximize the effect.

The study focuses on cognitive flexibility, which can be influenced by emotions, Sacharin (2009), examined the role of positive and negative emotions, using a reversal learning task, on different types of flexibility, and found that happiness improved cognitive flexibility. However, positive and negative emotions do not lie on opposite ends, but rather exist in a continuum. Studies assessed the relationship between people's levels of stress, which resulted in contradictory outcomes. Shah & Trivedi (2009), found that there is no significant difference between hostellers and day boarders. Supe, A.N (1998), found no difference in stress among the groups. Levels of positive and negative factors influence the change in a person's ability to be flexible and adapt, yet the change is subjective and attempting to generalize a result across gender, living situation, date, time and place is not a simple task. Although the current study attempted to find a correlation between Hostel Residents and Day Scholars in Cognitive Flexibility and Proactive Coping, it aided in the providing precise

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conclusion of the relationship between variables in the sample and empirical data of the same. Positive proactive coping has predicted positive job performance in the study of Ersen & Bilgic (2018). Similarly, students irrespective of living situations cope with adversities, adapt and grow in terms of academic and work performance. Academic performance across all the studies have presented negative significance in difference among hostellers and day scholars.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there exists no significant difference between hostel residents and native residents in Cognitive Flexibility. Null hypothesis retained. There was no significant difference found between two groups, hostellers, and day scholars in Proactive Coping. Null hypothesis retained.

Limitations

- Sample size of the study was limited and the study cannot be generalized to general population.
- There is a chance for bias and boredom from participants side to collection of responses through online method.
- The sample size of groups in the study differs and not equal to each other, which might have led to unequal variances between samples, or other possible error rates.
- The topic can be further narrowed down to a specific population, college or school.
- The causality cannot be explained and confounding variables might have affected the relationship.

Implications

Relationship strength have been affected by sample size, which indicates the true effect of the variables in the population is very small. Further research can analyze the existence of relationship with greater sample size and other sampling methods, which can be generalized to the whole population. Further research can focus on other age groups, for instance, students from school and study the significance of variables within them. Other factors, confounding variables that might have had an influence can be investigated. The causality of the relationship can be examined.

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Conflict of Interest

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