

Research Paper

Psychological Inflexibility and Fear of Negative Evaluation among Emerging Adults

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ABSTRACT

Psychological inflexibility is purported to be determinant of psychological distress and behavioral ineffectiveness. Fear of negative evaluation is a psychological construct that involves apprehension regarding how others perceive, potential distress over negative judgments, and an anticipatory expectation of unfavorable evaluations. The present study aimed to determine the relationship between psychological inflexibility and fear of negative evaluation among emerging adults. The research instruments used were AAQ-II to assess psychological inflexibility and brief FNE to assess fear of negative evaluation. The sample consisted of 102 emerging adults. The samples were collected using convenience sampling. The data were analysed using SPSS Version 27. The data was not normally distributed therefore the statistical techniques used were Spearman's Rank correlation test to find the result. The result of the study showed that there is a significant positive relationship between psychological inflexibility and fear of negative evaluation among emerging adults.

Keywords: *Emerging adults, Fear of negative evaluation, Negative judgments, Psychological distress, Psychological inflexibility*

Emerging adulthood is proposed as a new developmental stage covering the late teens to twenties, with a focus on ages 18 to 25. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett was the first psychologist who introduced this developmental stage. For most young people in industrialized countries the late teens to twenties represent a period of profound change and importance. During this time, numerous young people acquire the education and training that will provide the foundation for their incomes and career accomplishments throughout their adult working life. This period is often characterized by frequent change and exploration (Arnett, 1998; Rindfuss, 1991). Emerging Adults feel that it is essential to reassess the values they were taught in their families and form new opinions based on their own independent reflections, regardless of their educational experience. And this period is characterized by a relative freedom from normative expectations and social roles. According to numerous researches, taking ownership of one's actions and being able to make decisions

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on one's own are the two most important requirements for entering adulthood (Arnett, 1997, 1998; Greene et al., 1992; Scheer et al., 1994).

Psychological inflexibility refers to the rigid control of psychological reactions that take precedence over personal values and goals. It arises when individuals become entangled with negative thoughts and try to evade uncomfortable internal experiences. Paradoxically, this avoidance tends to heighten their distress, diminish their connection to the present moment, and lower the likelihood of pursuing meaningful goals and values (Hayes et al., 2004). Psychological inflexibility is believed to play a key role in psychological distress and ineffective behavior (Hayes et al., 2004; Bond et al., 2011). Higher levels of psychological inflexibility are linked to increased emotional distress, such as elevated symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as reduced life functioning, including greater work absenteeism. ACT employs a distinctive diagnostic Model called Hexaflex model (Bach & Moran, 2008). This hexagon-shaped visual aid is designed to classify and address client issues in a holistic manner. Each of its six domains (Acceptance, cognitive defusion, Values, committed action, self as context, contact with the present moment) aligns with one of ACT's core principles, offering a range of activities and exercises to support practitioners in guiding their clients forward. By utilizing the Hexaflex, therapists or coaches can determine an appropriate starting point for their therapeutic interventions. The six points of the Hexaflex represent the key components of psychological flexibility. Thus, it also indicates the components lacking in psychological inflexibility.

Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) was first defined by Watson and Friend in 1969 as "apprehension about other's evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively." Anxiousness, submissiveness, and social avoidance are all related to fear of negative evaluation. The cognitive Behavioral model of social phobia by Clark & Wells (1995) explains Individuals who suffer from social anxiety perceive social situations as dangerous. They fear that other people might assume poorly of them, thinking things like they're nervous, foolish, insane, dull, filthy, or unlikeable. As a result, they take steps to prevent their fears from materializing, often leading to significant emotional distress and substantial harm across various aspects of their lives.

Understanding psychological inflexibility and fear of negative evaluation in emerging adults is considered important in various aspects. Firstly, emerging adulthood is a period when individuals strive to reach their full potential, enhance their self-esteem, and gain social acceptance as they grow. However, when faced with challenging situations, the fear of negative evaluation such as worrying about what others might think, when they act in alignment with their values and beliefs can arise. Psychological inflexibility combined with the fear of negative evaluation may lead individuals to respond inappropriately to certain situations or hinder them from behaving in ways consistent with their values. Psychological inflexibility when combined with fear of negative evaluation can contribute to heightened emotional distress and maladaptive behavior patterns.

This study aimed to find the relationship between psychological inflexibility and fear of negative evaluation. And contributing valuable insights to advancements in mental health and personal development. These variables lead to various psychological challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and impaired self-esteem, which can disrupt daily functioning, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships. Understanding the relationship between psychological inflexibility and fear of negative evaluation is required to improve therapeutic

interventions like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), this research not only deepens theoretical understanding but also fosters resilience, adaptability, and effective coping mechanisms.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample of the study consisted of 102 participants within the age group of 18-25. Both males and females were included in the study. The samples were selected from various states of Kerala and samples were selected using convenience sampling method.

Instruments

Two measures were used in this study,

- 1. Acceptance and Action Questionnaire –Version 2 (AAQ-2):** The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire – version 2 (AAQ-II), is the most widely used measure both psychological flexibility and psychological inflexibility. It can be used weekly track how individuals are applying flexibility skills to their daily lives and is often used to measure progress in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Bond et al. (2011) developed Acceptance and Action Questionnaire –Version 2 (AAQ-2), which is a 7-item short inventory to assess the Psychological flexibility. Higher total scores on the AAQ-II indicate higher psychological inflexibility, experiential avoidance, and more potential psychological distress. Lower total scores mean more psychological flexibility. The AAQ-II demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .81$ at 3 months, $r = .79$ at 12 months). Higher AAQ-II scores were correlated with greater depression and anxiety symptoms, as measured by the Beck Depression Inventory, Beck Anxiety Inventory, and DASS. Individuals seeking substance abuse treatment ($M = 28.34$, $SD = 9.92$) exhibited significantly higher psychological inflexibility compared to those not in treatment ($M = 18.51$, $SD = 7.05$), with a large effect size ($d = 1.12$), indicating strong predictive validity.
- 2. Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation:** Fear of negative evaluation scale (FNE) is a widely used measure that assesses FNE various dimensions of social –evaluative anxiety (e.g., distress, avoidance, expectations). The scale is developed by David Watson and Ronald Friend in 1969. Whereas the brief FNE scale is developed by Leary, M. R in 1983. The Brief FNE is composed of the original FNE items which correlated above .50 with the total FNE score. The Brief FNE and the original FNE are highly correlated. The Brief FNE has excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .90. The Brief is also considered stable with a test-retest correlation of .75 over a four-week period. The Brief FNE was evaluated for validity first by correlating scores with the full-length FNE; this correlation was .96. The Brief FNE is rated on a five-point scale. Items 2, 4, 7 and 10 are reverse-scored. Total scores are the sum of the item responses and range from 12 to 60.

Procedure

For the data collection we choose the online mode, and data was collected using Google forms. A Google form was created by the researcher. The first page of the Google form contained consent form and then it proceeds with a personal data sheet. If all the required criteria are met by the participant, then the participant proceeds to the questionnaire of Psychological Inflexibility and Fear of Negativity. The link to the google form was then shared through social media. The response of the study was converted into spread sheet format for additional calculations.

RESULTS

Table. 1 Spearman's Rank Correlation between Psychological Inflexibility and Fear of Negative Evaluation.

Variables	Psychological Inflexibility	
Fear of negative Evaluation	r-value	0.546
	p-value	0.000

The table 1 shows Spearman's Rank Correlation between Psychological Inflexibility and Fear of Negative evaluation. The r-value between Psychological Inflexibility and fear of Negative Evaluation is 0.546 and the corresponding p- value is 0.000.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to find out relationship between Psychological Inflexibility and Fear of Negative Evaluation among emerging adults. Psychological Inflexibility refers to the rigid control of psychological reactions that take precedence over personal values and goals of an individual. Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) is a person's apprehension about other's evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively.

Individuals with high psychological inflexibility may exhibit greater anxiety, emotional distress and they may constantly worry of being negatively judged by others. This fear of being judged leads to avoidance, social withdrawal, or an excessive effort to seek approval, and all of this may impair their social, emotional, and psychological well-being. Another study conducted by Uğur et al. (2020) on undergraduate students in Turkey also indicated that, higher levels of fear of negative evaluation were related to higher levels of psychological inflexibility and psychological vulnerability.

From table 1 it can be inferred that there exists positive correlation between psychological Inflexibility and Fear of Negative Evaluation which is significant at 0.01 level. Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted. The positive correlation between psychological inflexibility and fear of negative evaluation aligns with both the cognitive-behavioral model of social phobia and the Hexaflex model of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The Cognitive Behavioral Model explains how negative evaluations are perceived and feared, while the Hexaflex Model provides a framework for understanding and intervening in the rigid thought and behavior patterns that sustain these fears. Together, they reinforce the hypothesis that these two constructs are significantly related. Thus, such findings make us understand the importance of fostering psychological flexibility to migrate fears of negative evaluation and improve overall resilience and mental health of an individual.

CONCLUSION

From this study it can be concluded that there is a positive relationship between Psychological Inflexibility and Fear of Negative Evaluation Among Emerging Adults.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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