The Relationship between Early Maladaptive Schemas, Avoidant Coping Styles, and Academic Self-Handicapping of the Students

Sarvar Azarnava
Department of Psychology, Rasht Branch, Islamic Azad University, Rasht, Iran

Hassan Boland*
Corresponding Author, Department of Counseling, University of Guilan, Rasht, Iran, Email: Hassan.boland@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and avoidant coping styles and academic self-handicapping of the students. This was a correlational study. The statistical population included all pre-university students in Rasht in academic year of 2013-2014 of whom 348 students were selected using the multistage cluster sampling method. Early maladaptive schemas questionnaire, Yang’s avoidance questionnaire, and handicapping questionnaire were used for data collection. Findings showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between the total score of early maladaptive schemas and all five areas of the schema with the total score academic self-handicapping and subscales of the claiming handicapping and behavioral handicapping. There is a positive and significant meaningful work the competitiveness and handicapping. The results showed that early maladaptive schemas related to the disruptive limitations could significantly predict 32% of the academic self-handicapping of the pre-university students. Therefore, it seems that changing and modifying the early maladaptive schemas and avoidant coping styles of the students can be effective in reducing the rate of academic self-handicapping.

Keywords: Early Maladaptive Schemas, Avoidant Coping Styles, Academic Self-Handicapping.
Introduction

At the end of high school, pre-university students encounter with serious challenges in preparation for most competitive entrance exams in order to continue their studies in higher education institutions. Berglas and Jones believe that some people, when encountered with a difficult task, are stuck in self-handicapping. They define self-handicapping as a behavior or a set of behaviors that allow the individual to attribute his or her failure to external and his or he success to the internal factors (Fatehizadeh, 2008).

Self-handicapping mainly refers to any situation in which there success is unknown or improbable (Fatehizadeh, 2008). Covington who proposed the self-worth theory, discussed self-handicapping at the institutional level. He believes that students aim to present a positive image of themselves by hard working at school. Therefore, when they encounter with the challenging tasks, they appeal to the excuses such as sickness and low practice justify their lack of qualification and adequacy and academic failures. This is a strategy used by these students to maintain their self-worth by avoiding their foolishness image when they have weak performance. They also use this strategy when their self-worth image is threatened and there are a high number of this kind of students at different schools where ranking and scoring is prevalent. In academic self-handicapping process, students are motivated to maintain their self-worth image to avoid the failure (Covington, quoted in Langhang et al., 2009). Self-handicapping behaviors include different practices such as the creation of numerous real or imaginary physical problem and mainly focus on injuries such as exaggeration (Rhodewalt et al., 1985). If self-handicapping is accepted as one of the problematic behaviors, it may have negative and destructive consequences. Studies show that self-handicapping is characterized by improper and negative behaviors (Shekarshekan et al, 2005).

In order to realize the internal control of self-handicapping and the dysfunctional thinking framework that leads to this phenomenon, people’s schemas should be examined. Yang has collected a series of schemes that are called basic schemas (Jill et al., 2008). In cognitive view, early maladaptive schemas are one of the most fundamental cognitive components, even sometimes they are formed before children can learn language. Preverbal schemas often influence on the information processing system below the threshold of consciousness and are self-coming (Yaghubi, 2001). Early maladaptive schemas are one of the new and important structures that examine the cognitive processing style and the way it influence the emotional processing. Early maladaptive Schema patterns are self-destructive emotional and cognitive patterns that are formed at the beginning of the mind development, repeated in life, and lead to the psychological problems (Yang et al., 2003; quoted Hamidpour, 2007). Early maladaptive schemas that cause emotional disorders are more rigid and objective schemas than those of ordinary people (Johnston et al., 2009).

The basic early maladaptive schemas due to the human's tendency towards the cognitive coordination were fighting for their own survival so that people show the internal or external behavior to maintain the status of their schema and continuity of the schemas is avoidant coping.
styles are one of the primary mechanisms that help schemas to continue (Young, 2003). Yang raises eighteen schemas including abandonment/instability, mistrust/abuse, emotional deprivation, defectiveness/shame, dependence/incompetence, vulnerability to harm or illness, enmeshment/undeveloped self, failure, entitlement/grandiosity, insufficient self-control and/or self-discipline, subjugation, self-sacrifice, approval-seeking/recognition-seeking, negativity/pessimism, emotional inhibition, unrelenting standards/hyper criticalness and punitiveness.

Avoidant coping style is another issue that is examined in this study. Young has introduced three coping styles including overcompensation, avoidance, and surrender. In overcompensation, people act opposite the schema and in surrender style, they act based on the schema. However, when patients use the avoidance coping style they live so that schemas are not activated, try to live with ignorance, so that they have no schema and avoid thinking about schemas, thoughts and images that stimulate the schemas (Yang et al., 2003; quoted Hamidpour, 2007). Coping style plays a major role in people's physical and psychological well-being (Folkman and Lazaru, 2003; quoted by Bahonar and Nikmanesh, 2003). Different type and severity of their schemas show the normal mental status or mental disorders (Stopa et al., 2001). In brief, the origin of self-handicapping of the students that is the root of many above problems can be predicted by identifying and analyzing the early maladaptive schemas of the students and their avoidant coping styles. This study was conducted due to the research needs for developing the concept of early maladaptive schemas and avoidant coping styles in psychological problems of the students and identifying the core of the academic self-handicapping.

Method

This was a descriptive and correlational study with a statistical population including all pre-university students in Rasht in 2015-2016 that were selected using the multistage cluster sampling method. Due to the superiority of 60 to 40 of the female students to the male students, 208 female students and 140 male students were selected. For data collection, following research tools were used.

Research Tools
Early Maladaptive Schemas Scale (EMSS):

This questionnaire was developed by Young (1990) with 90 items that measures 18 areas of early maladaptive schemas. Each item is scored from 1 to 6. Young et al (1995) reported the reliability of this questionnaire using internal consistency and test-retest on a sample of 564 students as 0.95 and 0.81, respectively. In Iran, Yousefi et al (2008) investigated validity and reliability of this questionnaire on a sample of 579 patients in two stages. Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.91 and 0.86, respectively. Cronbach's alpha for all the factors was above 0.81 and for the whole questionnaire was 0.91. The highest level was related to the social isolation with Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 and the lowest level was related to self-control with Cronbach's alpha of 0.80.
Young- Rygh’s Avoidance Inventory:

This questionnaire has 40 items. It was developed for evaluating the avoidant coping styles. Each items is scored from 1 to 6. Avoidant coping styles based on this questionnaire include: Intentionally not thinking about upsetting things, Substance abuse, Denial of unhappiness, Excessive rationality and control, Suppression of anger, Psychosomatic symptoms, Withdrawal from people, Denial of memories, Avoidance through sleep / lack of energy, Distraction through activity, Self-soothing (eating, shopping, etc.), Passive blocking of upsetting emotions, Passive distraction: Fantasy, daydreaming, television, Avoidance of upsetting situations (Young, 1994, quoted by Hamidpour, 2007). High scores indicate the dominant avoidant strategy. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the whole questionnaire was obtained by Alfasfos (2009) as 0.5 and for subscales between 0.33 and 0.76, respectively. This inventory was used in Iran for the students by Yazdandoost and Salavati (2007) and its reliability coefficient was obtained 0.79 using splitting.

Self- Handicapping Scale (SHS):

Self-handicapping scale was developed by Jones in 1982 by Jones and Rhodewalt. It measures the tendency of the people to self-handicapping using the scales from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (6). Correlation of the self-handicapping scale with its related structures such as justification and little effort was reported in a sample of 245 people from 0.27 to 0.6 and its internal consistency was reported from 0.38 to 0.70. Rosenberg’s self-esteem scale that measures the consensus validity of the self-handicapping included 10 items that were scored based on a 4-point Likert scale.

Findings

Statistical sample of this study included 304 pre-university students (208 girls and 96 boys). Table 1 reports descriptive indices of the research variables such as the mean and standard deviation. Moreover, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used for analyzing the normal distribution of variables among the subjects. Non-significant results show the normal distribution of variables.

Table 1- descriptive indicators of the research variables and Kolmogorov-Smirnov test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>k-s</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disconnection and Rejection</td>
<td>73.084</td>
<td>23.167</td>
<td>0.964</td>
<td>0.311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impaired Autonomy and Performance</td>
<td>53.906</td>
<td>20.012</td>
<td>0.689</td>
<td>0.730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impaired Limits</td>
<td>34.980</td>
<td>8.543</td>
<td>0.109</td>
<td>0.742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other- Directedness</td>
<td>47.572</td>
<td>11.789</td>
<td>1.221</td>
<td>0.101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overvigilance / Inhibition</td>
<td>68.982</td>
<td>15.096</td>
<td>1.083</td>
<td>0.191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score of early maladaptive schemas</td>
<td>259.483</td>
<td>63.925</td>
<td>0.888</td>
<td>0.410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentionally not thinking about upsetting</td>
<td>11.070</td>
<td>3.033</td>
<td>0.924</td>
<td>0.321</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Table 1, the distribution of variables among the subjects is normal (P<0.05). Due to the normality of the variable distribution, parametric statistics were used to evaluate the research hypotheses.

First hypothesis: there is a relationship between the early maladaptive schemas and academic self-handicapping of the students.

Pearson correlation coefficient was used for analyzing the relationship between the early maladaptive schemas and academic self-handicapping of the students. Results were reported in Table 2.

Table 2- relationship between early maladaptive schemas and academic self-handicapping of the students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>variable</th>
<th>Claiming self-handicapping</th>
<th>Behavioral self-handicapping</th>
<th>Total score of academic self-handicapping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disconnection and Rejection</td>
<td><strong>0.598</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.415</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.524</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impaired Autonomy and Performance</td>
<td><strong>0.571</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.481</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.546</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impaired Limits</td>
<td><strong>0.658</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.493</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.615</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-Directedness</td>
<td><strong>0.570</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.442</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.529</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overvigilance / Inhibition</td>
<td><strong>0.606</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.528</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.591</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score of early maladaptive schemas</td>
<td><strong>0.596</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.355</strong></td>
<td><em>0.505</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Table 2, results of Pearson correlation coefficient shows that there is a positive and significant relationship among the total score of early maladaptive schemas, subscales of disconnection and rejection, impaired autonomy and performance, impaired limits, other-directedness, overvigilance / inhibition and total score of academic self-handicapping and subscales of claiming self-handicapping and behavioral self-handicapping (P<0.01). Therefore, the first hypothesis is confirmed.

Second hypothesis: there is a relationship between the avoidant coping styles and academic self-handicapping of the pre-university students. Pearson correlation coefficient was used for analyzing the relationship between avoidant coping behaviors and academic self-handicapping. Results were reported in Table 3.

As shown in table 3, the results of Pearson correlation coefficient shows that there is a positive and significant relationship among the total score of avoidant coping behaviors and subscales of intentionally not thinking about upsetting things, psychosomatic symptoms, denial of memories, withdrawal from people, avoidance of upsetting situations, self-soothing (eating, shopping, etc.), passive blocking of upsetting emotions, passive distraction (fantasy, daydreaming, television) and total score of the academic self-handicapping and subscales of claiming self-handicapping and behavioral self-handicapping (P<0.01). In addition, there is a positive and significant relationship between the subscales of suppression of anger and the total score of academic handicapping (P<0.05) and subscales of behavioral self-handicapping (P<0.01). On the contrary, there is a negative and significant relationship between the subscales of denial of unhappiness and claiming self-handicapping (P<0.01). However, there was no significant relationship among the subscales of excessive rationality and control, distraction through activity and the total score of the academic self-handicapping and subscales of claiming self-handicapping and behavioral self-handicapping(P>0.05). Moreover, there was no significant relationship between the subscales of denial of unhappiness, behavioral self-handicapping, suppression of anger, and claiming self-handicapping (P>0.05). Therefore, the second hypothesis is confirmed.

Table 3- relationship between the avoidant coping behaviors and academic self-handicapping of the students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>variable</th>
<th>Claiming self-handicapping</th>
<th>Behavioral self-handicapping</th>
<th>Total score of self-handicapping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intentionally not thinking about upsetting things</td>
<td><strong>0.186</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.168</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.175</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of unhappiness</td>
<td><em>-0.140</em></td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>-0.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive rationality and control</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.120</td>
<td>0.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suppression of anger</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td><strong>0.162</strong></td>
<td><em>0.127</em>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Psychosomatic symptoms | **0.448** | **0.358** | **0.426**  
Denial of memories | **0.283** | **0.192** | **0.255**  
Withdrawal from people | **0.300** | **0.270** | **0.295**  
Avoidance through sleep / lack of energy | **0.515** | **0.350** | **0.460**  
Distraction through activity | 0.046 | 0.104 | 0.066  
Self-soothing (eating, shopping, etc.) | **0.492** | **0.430** | **0.477**  
Passive blocking of upsetting emotions | **0.262** | **0.224** | **0.252**  
Passive distraction: Fantasy, daydreaming, television | **0.439** | **0.318** | **0.395**  
Avoidance of upsetting situations | **0.492** | **0.430** | **0.477**  
Total score of the avoidant coping behaviors | **0.262** | **0.224** | **0.252**

**Third hypothesis:** academic self-handicapping of the pre-university students is predictable using the early maladaptive schemas and avoidant coping behaviors. Due to the significant relationship between early maladaptive schemas and avoidant coping behaviors and academic self-handicapping, multiple stepwise regression analysis was used to determine the role of predictor variable (early maladaptive schemas and avoidant coping behaviors) in predicting criterion variables (academic self-handicapping). Results were reported in Table 4.

Table 4- Summary of regression model and statistical characteristics of regression for academic self-handicapping, early maladaptive schemas, and avoidant coping styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion variable</th>
<th>Predictor variable</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SEB</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>f</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-handicapping</td>
<td>Impaired limitations</td>
<td>0.570</td>
<td>0.325</td>
<td>1.418</td>
<td>0.226</td>
<td><strong>0.570</strong></td>
<td>6.280</td>
<td>39.414</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regression results showed that only one variable could differentially predict the changes in academic self-handicapping, so that subscale of early maladaptive schemas of the impaired limits could hierarchically and significantly predict 32% of the changes in academic self-handicapping of pre-university students ($R^2=0.325$). Impact factor of subscale of early maladaptive schemas and impaired limits is $B=1.418$ that significantly predict academic self-handicapping of the pre-university students. It means that as the subscale of early maladaptive schemas of the impaired limitations, academic self-handicapping of the students increases, and as the subscale of early
maladaptive schemas of impaired limitations decreases, academic self-handicapping of the students decreases. Therefore, the third hypothesis is confirmed.

Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between early maladaptive schemas, avoidant coping styles and academic self-handicapping of pre-university students. The results show that there is a positive and significant relationship between the total score of early maladaptive schemas, subscales of disconnection and rejection, impaired autonomy and performance, impaired limits, other-directedness, overvigilance / inhibition and total score of academic self-handicapping and subscales of claiming self-handicapping and behavioral self-handicapping. Although there is no direct literature that its result can be compared with those of this study, the results of this study are consistent with those of Dolati (2012) who showed that early maladaptive schemas of the students shows higher rate of academic drop compared to the ordinary students. Furthermore, the results of this study are indirectly consistent with those of Lotfi et al (2007), Pakdel (2010) and Pourmohammad (2011), Tale (2012) in the fact that there is higher number of early maladaptive schemas in clinical groups compared to the ordinary people. Overall, these findings are consistent with the theory of Young's et al. (2003) that focuses on the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and behavioral problems.

The results show that there is a positive and significant relationship among the total score of avoidant coping behaviors and subscales of intentionally not thinking about upsetting things, psychosomatic symptoms, denial of memories, withdrawal from people, avoidance of upsetting situations, self-soothing (eating, shopping, etc.), passive blocking of upsetting emotions, passive distraction (fantasy, daydreaming, television) and total score of the academic self-handicapping and subscales of claiming self-handicapping and behavioral self-handicapping. In addition, there is a positive and significant relationship between the subscales of suppression of anger and the total score of academic handicapping and subscales of behavioral self-handicapping. On the contrary, there is a negative and significant relationship between the subscales of denial of unhappiness and claiming self-handicapping. However, there was no significant relationship among the subscales of excessive rationality and control, distraction through activity and the total score of the academic self-handicapping and subscales of claiming self-handicapping and behavioral self-handicapping. Moreover, there was no significant relationship between the subscales of denial of unhappiness, behavioral self-handicapping, suppression of anger, and claiming self-handicapping.

The results of this study are consistent with theories on handicapping including Klinke's (1996) who believes that when people avoid accepting the responsibility for their actions, they in fact use the self-handicapping strategy. Moreover, Zuckerman et al. (1998) found that there is a relationship between the coping strategy and self-handicapping. Harris and Snyder (1990) showed that self-handicapping people mostly use the avoidant coping strategies and wishful thinking. This finding is consistent with Young’s theory on the coping style. Young believes that people who use these styles try not use schemas in their lives. They avoid the situations in which
they have to activate these schemas and if the schemas are activated, they appeal to the behaviors that avoid the emotional upsets related to the schemas and escape from it (Young, 2003; quoted by Sahebi and Hamidpour, 2007).

Results showed that only one variable could differentially predict the changes in academic self-handicapping, so that subscale of early maladaptive schemas of the impaired limits could hierarchically and significantly predict 32% of the changes in academic self-handicapping of pre-university students. It means that as the subscale of early maladaptive schemas of the impaired limitations, academic self-handicapping of the students increases, and as the subscale of early maladaptive schemas of impaired limitations decreases, academic self-handicapping of the students decreases. Although there is no direct literature that its result can be compared with those of this study, the results of this study are consistent with those of Walburga and Chiaramello on the early maladaptive schemas and defense mechanisms who showed impaired limitations that predict the defense mechanisms are immature. Moreover, the results of this study that shows the impaired limitations can predict the self-handicapping are consistent with that of Covington’s (1998) who believes self-handicapping is a kind of strategy for maintaining the self-esteem.
References


