The Role of Self-concept and Defense Mechanisms on Predicting Symptoms of Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder in University Samples

1. Niloofar Mikaeili*, 2. Mehri Mowlaie

1. Corresponding author: Professor of psychology, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran. Email: nmikaeili@uma.ac.ir
2.PhD of psychology, Islamic Azad University, Ardabil, Iran. Email: mehri.molaee@uma.ac.ir

Abstract

The aim of the present research was to examine the relationship between self-concept and defense mechanisms in adult separation anxiety disorder. The present research was performed with 380 students of Mohaghegh Ardabili University and Islamic Azad University of Ardabil with convenience sampling method using Adult separation anxiety disorder, defense mechanism and self-concept scales. The data were analyzed with Pearson correlation method and step way regression. The results showed that there were positive relationships between adult separation anxiety disorder with negative self-concept and negative relationship with positive self-concept, also, negative relationship with mature defense mechanism, and positive relationship with immature and neurotic defense mechanism. The results of the step way regression analysis showed that immature, neurotic, mature defense mechanisms and self-concept were predictors of adult separation anxiety disorder, respectively. The findings of the present study indicate the research evidence for more accurate diagnosis of this disorder and identify the psychoanalytic variables associated with it.

Keywords: Adult separation anxiety disorder, defense mechanism, self-concept

Introduction

Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent psychiatric disorders (Mohammadi, et al., 2019). Adult separation anxiety disorder is one of the disorders characterized by anxiety symptoms of separation from attachment figures, uneasiness when leaving home, worry about loss of attachment figures or illness, disaster, death, and worry about an accident, repetitive nightmares about separation issues, (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The lack of a clear self-concept is one of the issues reported in these patients. The lacks of secure attachments impede the development of unorganized self-awareness structures and result in low self-concept and self-consistency instability (Pozavak & Pozavak, 2019). One study showed that patients have an inadequate view of themselves (Bush & Milord, 2015) and they feel empowered in areas that do not require intelligence (Suszek, et al., 2018).

Due to the destructive effects of anxiety on performance and its release, defense mechanisms that have a protective effect are used. Different types of defense mechanisms are used in different psychiatric disorders (Colovic, et al., 2016). In one research, high use of acting out and low use of humor and sublimation predicted high levels of anxiety (Jun, et al., 2015). In reviewing external and internal research, most studies on defense mechanisms have been conducted on other psychiatric disorders, and no research has been found to examine all components of defense mechanisms and self-concept in adult separation anxiety disorder.

Therefore, the main hypothesis and question of the present study was as follow: there is a relationship between positive and negative self-concept and defense mechanisms with adult separation anxiety and their role to predict this disorder.

Method

This research was a retrospective study with a correlation approach. The statistical population consisted of all students studying in Mohaghegh Ardabili University and Islamic Azad University of Ardabil Branch in the academic year 2017-2018. The sample consisted of 380 students in all academic courses that were selected by cluster random sampling method.

Tools:

Adult Separation Anxiety Scale: ASA-27 is a 27-item self-report questionnaire developed by Manicavasagar et al. (2003). The items are rated from 0 to 3. Scores of >22 indicate clinically significant levels of ASA; this cut-off score has been reported to have high sensitivity (81%) and specificity (84%) (Manicavasagar et al, 2003). In the present research, Cronbach's α for the entire scale was 0.90 and for five subscales was 0.88, 0.90, 0.78, 0.87, and 0.91, respectively.

Self-concept scale: This scale was designed by Beck and Macaran (1990) and consists of 25 items. High scores indicate positive self-concept. Alpha coefficient is reported to be 0.82. In Iran, Cronbach's α coefficient was 0.85 Nawabi-nejad (1994) and had a high internal correlation. In this study, Cronbach's α coefficient was 0.83.

Defence mechanism scale: It consists of 40 items on a 9-point Likert scale (Andrews et al., 1993) and assesses 20 defense mechanisms in mature, neurotic, and immature styles. Cronbach's α coefficients for immature, mature and neurotic defense mechanisms were 0.85, 0.65 and 0.62, respectively (Tap et al., 2017). In Iran, in the study of Besharat et al. (2001), Cronbach's α coefficients were 0.75, 0.73, and 0.74 for defensive styles respectively. A 4-week retest was 0.82.

Results

The results of correlation coefficient between research variables show that adult separation anxiety disorder had significant relationships with all variables. In order to use the regression analysis of variance, the tests of all assumption under lying this test, such as, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the Durbin-Watson test and the linearity of the VIF index were used, indicating that it is possible to perform the regression analysis. The results of regression analysis of variance showed that predicted variables (self-concept, immature, neurotic, and mature defense mechanisms) were able to predict adult separation anxiety disorder (p <0.05, F = 16.68).

Table 1 The results of regression analysis of variance of all research predicted variables

Model	SS	DF	SM	F	Sig
regression	4491.755	4	1122.939	16.68	0.001
residual	25234.55	375	67.292		
Total	29726.305	379			

To investigate the predictive power of each predictor variables, standardized regression coefficients are presented separately in Table 2. The results of regression analysis showed that immature defense mechanisms were the strongest predictors among other variables, with beta of equal to 0.23, which positively predict adult separation anxiety disorder. Neurotic and mature defense mechanisms and self-concept predict adult separation anxiety disorder with a beta of 0.20, -0.19 and 0.15, respectively.

Table 2: Regression analysis of self-concept, and defense mechanisms in prediction of ASAD

Predicted variables	B	SEB	Beta	T	Sig
Immature defense mechanism	0.09	0.02	0.23	4.27	0.000
Neurotic defense mechanism	0.16	0.04	0.20	3.75	0.000
Mature defense mechanism	-0.18	0.05	-0.19	-3.61	0.000
Self-concept	0.13	0.04	0.15	3.08	0.002

Discussion

The first finding showed that there was a significant positive relationship between negative self-concept and adult separation anxiety and a negative relationship with positive self-concept and ASAD. Immature defense mechanisms were the strongest predictors of adult separation anxiety which subcomponents of omnipotence, devaluation, acting out, somatization, autistic fantasy and, splitting were related significantly with ASAD. Another finding of the present study showed that there was a significant relationship between all components of neurotic defense mechanisms with ASAD and this defense mechanism was able to predict 20% of the variance. The final findings of the present study showed that there was a significant negative relationship between all components of mature defense mechanisms except prediction with ASAD.

The present research had some limitations that should be taken into account while interpreting the results. First, the sample included students and should be cautious when generalizing the results to other groups; Second, all our participants were females; this limits the extrapolation of our findings to male patients. Therefore, future studies involving both genders with considering different use of defense mechanisms are warranted.

Acknowledgments

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