

Analysis of the Effect of Training Life Skills on Defensive Mechanisms and Styles of Students' Attachments

Farzaneh Moshtaqi^{1*}, Parviz Sharifi Daramadi², Ali Esmaili²

¹Department of Clinical Psychology, Shahrood branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran

*E-mail: Farzaneh.moshtaqi @ yahoo.com

²Department of Psychology, University of Allameh Tabatabai, Tehran, Iran

Received for publication: 26 May 2014.

Accepted for publication: 10 August 2014.

Abstract

One of the main aspects of human characteristics is his attachments styles in human relations and other aspects, which are regarded as defensive methods of the self-base of one's characteristic. The purpose of this research is to examine the impact of training life skills on the improvement of attachment styles and defensive mechanisms of students. This research is conducted using quasi-experimental method which is in form of pretest – posttest with control group. The statistical population consists of all female students of PNU University of Varamin Pishva. The sampling method is snowball sampling and its sample population included 50 female students ranging from 20 to 30 years old who earned the lowest score in the questionnaire of defensive mechanisms and Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS) and were divided into two control and experimental groups of 25 members. Members of experimental group attended in 8 sessions of a 2-hours training program. After training them, again the questionnaire was administered for two groups. Data was analyzed by SPSS 18 software and covariance test. The results indicated that the program of training life skills has significantly improved the neurotic defensive mechanisms ($P=0.001$) and avoidance attachment style ($P=0.04$) of the experimental group compared to the control group in the post-test stage. But, this training has not significantly changed the mature defensive mechanisms ($P=0.20$) and the immature defensive mechanism ($P=0.74$) and also the secure attachment style ($P=0.20$) and ambivalent attachment style ($10/0 = P$) in the experimental group compared to the control. This study showed that the life skill training can be applied as a useful interference method for students.

Keywords: life skills training, defensive mechanisms, attachment styles, students.

Introduction

One of the main aspects of human characteristics is his attachments styles in human relations. Attachment is establishment of deep emotional relationship with specific people in life in a way that interacting with them creates a feeling of joy and happiness and its existence at its presence is comforting at the anxious situations (Bagheri, 2009). Children's attachment that impacts their future psychological modes is divided into three categories of secure attachment, insecure or disorganized attachment and avoidance attachment (Karbasi, 2009). A person with a secure attachment pattern believes that his guardian is accessible and experiences himself positively. In avoidance attachment pattern, the guardian continuously banishes him and he himself is also insecure but he is forced to trust himself and finally in the anxious attachment pattern, he experiences his guardian as an unstable respondent and himself as a dependent and worthless person (Austin, 2006). Another aspect is the defensive methods of the self-base of people's characteristic. Defensive mechanisms can be defined as unconscious thoughts of "self" to confront anxiety, guard

the person against the feelings of incompetence and maintaining self-esteem (Kramer, Jones, 2007). Rota et al (2006) in analyzing the questionnaire including 40 questions about defensive styles distinguished 4 factors from each other including the immature style, mature style, distorted defenses and psychiatric defenses.

Trusting oneself and others are considered as two basic characteristics of secure people and lack of self-confidence by analysis of intra psychological bases imposes the power to face well with stressful situations, frustration and psychological distress and justifies his adherence to the immature and neurotic defense styles. Also, it was determined that interference programs including training life skills are effective in improving the attachment styles and defensive mechanisms of people. Life skills are approaches based on behavior change or behavior formation that takes into account the balance between three areas of knowledge, attitude and skills (UNICEF, 2007). According to World Health Organization (1999), life skills training includes 10 basic skills for living. These skills include decision-making skills, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, the ability to communicate effectively, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions and stress.

Several researches have shown the positive impact of life skills on the defensive mechanisms and attachment styles. Noorbala et al. (2010), in their research, entitled "The Effect of training written emotional disclosure on the intensity of depression and use of defense mechanisms in depressed patients", concluded that, based on this training, defensive mechanisms (prevention, reverse reaction, and compensation) significantly decreased in the experimental group compared to the control group ($P < 0/05$). Based on research findings, titled "alexithymia and defense style" by Basharat (2008), it can be concluded that alexithymia is associated with self defense mechanisms.

Also, regarding the effect of life skills training on attachment styles in the study conducted by Khodabakhsh (2012), under the title of "the relationship between attachment styles and empathy in nursing students", it can be concluded that; there is a significant positive correlation between empathy and insecure attachment styles and there is a significant negative correlation between secure attachment and empathy ($P < 0/05$).

Based on the findings of the study by Vahedian and Hosseinkhah (2011) under the title of "comparison of attachment style and creativity in male and female students", they concluded that the level of creativity in both groups is significantly different and the results obtained from this study based on regression analysis showed that avoidance attachment style is a predictor of the level of creativity.

Also, based on the study conducted by Ramezani, Shams Esfand Abad and Tahmasbi (2007) under the title of "The analysis of the outcomes of Emotional attachment styles on students", they concluded that secure attachment is directly related to Differentiation and reconstruction or emotional management and insecure avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles are inversely related with both differentiation and emotional reconstruction components. Regarding the instances mentioned above, the aim of the present research is to analyze the impact of life skills training on the defensive mechanisms and attachment styles of students.

Research hypothesis

Life skills training can improve defensive mechanisms and attachment styles of students.

Methodology

This research is quasi-experimental and in form of pretest – posttest with control group and the method used is interventional. The statistical population consists of all female students of PNU University of Varamin, Pishva. The sample population included 50 female students ranging from 20 to 30 years old who were chosen by using accessible sampling. First, defensive mechanism

questionnaire and adult attachment scale were conducted on 150 female students. Among them 50 students who earned lower scores from these two questionnaires were chosen and divided into two groups of 25 people of control group and experimental group. The experimental group was trained life skills including; communication skills and effective communication during four sessions including the art of listening, attention to body language and the criticism method and in the fourth session the communication skills and self-relationship is discussed. After two sessions of self-awareness including identifying abilities, talents, weaknesses and attention to emotional states and motivations were taught. Training negative emotion management including stress, anger and sadness was conducted in two sessions that this training overall lasted in 8 two-hour sessions during a month and two sessions a week. Meanwhile, the control group did not receive any training and again after a month the two questionnaires were conducted on both groups. At the end, the data were analyzed using SPSS 18 software and descriptive statistics tests including the mean, standard deviation, frequency, percentages and inferential statistics of the data by using ANCOVA.

The questionnaire of defensive mechanisms includes 77 mechanisms conducted by Hoseini (2007), as MA thesis by the help of Hasan Abdollah Zadeh on 200 students and primary normalization. Answers to the test were arranged from totally agree to totally disagree on a 5 degree Likert scale. This questionnaire evaluates 14 defensive mechanisms. Types of defensive mechanisms of this questionnaire include rejection, compensation, assimilation, projection, accusation, reverse reaction, return, replacement, denial, fantasies, sublimated, transformation and rationalization. Reliability of the test is obtained by calculating Cronbach's alpha for students which equals to 84% and calculation of correlation coefficient between each statement and the total score of the test. The results obtained from normalization showed that the questionnaire has an appropriate level of reliability and validity. Mature attachment scale, (RAAS) was provided in 1990 by Collins and Read and was reviewed in 1996. Its theoretical basis is this test of attachment theory. The mature attachment scale includes 18 statements that respondents state their agreement or disagreement with each statement in a 5 degree Likert scale. This questionnaire includes three sub-scales of: attachment, affinity and anxiety. Testable based on the results obtained are placed in one of the three groups having secure, anxious and avoidance attachment styles. The reliability coefficient of retesting this test by Collins and Read for each sub-scale of affinity, attachment and anxiety is reported as 0.68, 0.71 and 0.52 respectively. Since the amounts of Alpha Cronbach in all cases equals to 0.80 or higher, the obtained reliability level is high and with regard to research in Iran, this test is reliable at 95% confidence level.

Research findings

The mean of Neurotic defensive mechanisms in experimental group ($X=87.64$) compared to control group ($X=77.87$) has significantly changed but, no significant change was seen in the two types of mature and immature mechanisms. Also, the mean of avoidance attachment in experimental group ($X=15.88$) was changed compared to the control group ($X=18.12$). But there is no change in two secure and ambivalent attachment styles. Before analyzing the research findings about research hypothesis, the homogeneity of regression slopes as the assumptions necessary for the application of covariance analysis was ensured.

The results of Table 1 show that after considering pre-test scores as covariance variable, the main effect of training variable on the scores of mature defensive mechanisms of post-test is not significant ($P = 0.22$ and $F(1/47) = 1/55$). Thus, training life skills did not improve using students' mature mechanisms.

Table 1. ANCOVA analysis for the impacts of training on the mature defensive mechanisms with pre-test control

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pretest	0/41	1	0/41	0/08	0/78
Group	8/39	1	8/39	1/55	0/22
Error	255/27	47	5/43		
Total	264	49			

Table 2. The summary of covariance analysis for the impacts of training on the mature Neurotic mechanisms with pre-test control

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pretest	1393/96	1	1393/96	17/39	0/001
Group	918/387	1	918/38	11/46	0/001
Error	3766/44	47	80/14		
Total	6533	49			

The results of Table 2 show that after considering pre-test scores as covariance variable, the main effect of training variable on the scores of neurotic defensive mechanisms of post-test is significant ($P = 0 /001$ and $F (1/47) = 11/47$). Thus, training life skills improved using students' neurotic defensive mechanisms.

Table 3. The summary of covariance analysis for the impacts of training on the immature mechanisms with pre-test control

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pretest	109/31	1	109/31	1/08	0/30
Group	11/69	1	11/69	0/12	0/74
Error	4761/09	47	101/30		
Total	4892	49			

The results of Table 3 show that after considering pre-test scores as covariance variable, the main effect of training variable on the scores of immature defensive mechanisms of post-test is not significant ($P = 0 /12$ and $F (1/47) = 0/12$). Thus, training life skills did not improve using students' immature defensive mechanisms.

Table 4. The summary of covariance analysis for the impacts of training on the secure attachment with pre-test control

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pretest	1/42	1	1/42	0/12	0/73
Group	21/50	1	21/50	1/73	0/20
Error	584/10	47	12/43		
Total	606	49			

The results of Table 4 show that after adjusting pre-test scores as covariance variable, the main effect of training variable on the scores of secure attachment style of post-test is not significant ($P = 0/20$ and $F(1/47) = 0/73$). Thus, training life skills did not change the students' secure attachment style.

Table 5. The summary of covariance analysis for the impacts of training on the avoidance attachment with pre-test control

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pretest	66/20	1	66/20	4/10	0/04
Group	57/25	1	57/25	3/56	0/04
Error	759/24	47	61/15		
Total	9/8	49			

The results of Table 5 show that after adjusting for pre-test scores as covariance variable, the main effect of training variable on the scores of avoidance attachment style of post-test is significant ($P = 0/04$ and $F(1/47) = 3/56$). Thus, training life skills changed the students' avoidance attachment style.

Table 6. The summary of covariance analysis for the impacts of training on the ambivalent attachment with pre-test control

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pretest	25/85	1	25/85	1/17	0/28
Group	64/03	1	64/03	2/94	0/10
Error	1036/15	47	22/05		
Total	114	49			

The results of Table 6 show that after adjusting for pre-test scores as covariance variable, the main effect of training variable on the scores of ambivalent attachment style of post-test is not significant ($P = 0/10$ and $F(1/47) = 2/94$). Thus, training life skills did not change the students' ambivalent attachment style.

Results and discussion

Based on the research hypothesis regarding the effectiveness of life skills training on the students' improvement of defensive mechanisms and attachment styles, the results of this research indicate that training life skills improves the neurotic defensive mechanisms and avoidance attachment style of students but did not improve the mature and immature defensive mechanisms and two styles of secure and insecure ambivalent attachment. The finding of this research, regarding the effectiveness of training defensive skills, are consistent with findings of Besharat research (2008), entitled "Alexithymia and defensive styles". Since self-defense is conceptualized as psychological mechanisms to manage debilitating emotions, this can be explained that Alexithymia leads to one's inability in adjustment and management of emotions and this Alexithymia appears on the level of defensive mechanisms by applying neurotic and immature defensive styles. Emotional reactions, against emotional failure, as the essence of emotional failure confirms to the ability in emotional self-adjustment and ability to recognition process of emotional information and emotional

adjustment. When the emotional information is properly perceived and evaluated in the process of cognitive processing, the organization of one's emotions and perceptions will perform optimally and consequently the probability of using mature defensive mechanisms increases in stressful situations. Using mature defensive mechanisms in turn increases ones' reaction and capacity for emotional management. Thus, on the practical and especially physical level, providing plans of training emotional skills can help people to use more mature defensive mechanisms.

Also, this research is aligned with that of Noor Bala et al (2011). Since emotional disclosure by creating insight, empathy and support, lowers the emotional load input to the cognitive system, it can improve one's cognitive performance to use more adjusted defensive mechanisms; thus, the written emotional disclosure can be used as an effective factor besides therapeutic strategies. Also, the findings of this research about the impact of this training on the attachment style are aligned with findings of Khodabakhsh's research (2012), entitled "the relationship between attachment styles and nursing students empathy. In explaining this research, it can be said that attachment styles are stable patterns of relationship and influence people's behavior in different situations. People with secure attachment style assume their relations with others as stable, accessible and respondent, thus they experience much success in creating and maintaining successful relationships with others. People with secure attachment style form a sense of confidence in the people they face with. This sense of confidence causes the creation of the capacity of positive and sympathetic response to others in the future relations. Researches show that lack of secure attachment links to aggressive behavior that prevents sympathy (H., Junla, Maugun, Naskav Maggie, 2003). And Khodabakhsh, based on research results, concluded that secure and insecure attachment styles can be related to nurse's empathy. Accordingly, providing educational and interference programs to increase helpful relations, can teach nurses appropriate skills about improving relationship of nurse-patient, reducing burnout and finally empathy. Also, findings of this research are aligned with findings of the research conducted by Hosseini Khah and Vahedian (2011). In explaining these findings, it can be said that the normal action of explanation which is the characteristic of people having secure attachment gives the secure man the required flexibility and courage to experience and experiment, in fact the attachment styles predicts the level of creativity. Thus, training creative skills to people is effective in improving the attachment styles.

According to other findings of research, training life skills did not have significant effect on improving the mature and immature defensive mechanisms and styles of secure and ambivalent attachment; these findings are not in agreement with Besharat and Noor Bala et al research about the impact of training on mature and immature defensive mechanisms. The findings of this research is not aligned with the findings of the research by Khodabakhsh Ramezani, Shams Esfand Abad and Tahmasevi as well as other findings on the effect of education on improving ambivalent insecure and secure attachment that in explaining the cause, it can be noted that. since most of the problems encountered by students during their education is due to their unfamiliarity with life skills in the courses of appropriate and sufficient time, so for the lack of enough time necessary for training and not holding workshops and classes for training skills continuously, in this research, training life skills did not lead to improvement of mature and immature defensive mechanisms and ambivalent and secure attachment of students.

Among the limitations of the study, we can mention that only female participated in this study, and few numbers of testable items, accessible sampling method that reduces the generalizability of research findings. Thus, in order to generalize the obtained results, it is recommended to do similar studies with larger samples and comprehensive measuring tools along with clinical interviews on other groups, including female and male students with follow-up period

so that, through this way, the impact of this type of training is practically determined in addition to determining the impact of training.

References

- Bagheri, Kh., Bahrami H. & Jalali, M. (2009). The relationship between attachment styles and identities of 15-30 years prisoners. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 3, 85-99.
- Basharat, MA. (2008). Alexithymia and defensive style. *Journal of primary and mental health*. 10, 3 (39). 181-190.
- Collins & Read, (1990). Adult Attachment scale, retrieved from: www.gse.uci.edu/child_care/pdf/.../adult&20 Attachment%20 part% Pdf.
- Collins & Read, (1996). Revised Adult Attachment scale, retrieved from: www.psych.ohio.edu/.../210558%20 intake %20 packet %20 part % 204.doc.
- Cramer, P., & Jones, C.J. (2007). Defense mechanisms predict differential life span change in self-control and self-acceptance. *Journal of Research on Personality*. 41, 841-855.
- Hojat M, Gonnella JS., Mangiones, Nasca TY., & Magee M. (2013). Physician empathy in medical education and practice; Experience with the Jefferson scale of physician Empathy. *Seminars on Integrative medicine*, (1), 25-41.
- Hosseinkhah, N., & Vahedian, M. (2011). Comparing the style and creativity of the students, the *Lbstgy. Innovation and creativity in humanities*, 1 (2).
- Karbassi, M. (2009). *Developmental psychology 1*, PNU Publication. 197-196.
- Khodabaksh, M.R. (2012). The relationship between attachment styles and empathy in nursing students, *Journal of Nursing Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences (Iranian Nursing Journal)*, 25 (77), September, 49-40.
- Noorbala, AA. Ali Pour, A., Shaghaghi, F., Najimi, Avysa & Agah Haris Harris, M. (2011). The effect of training written emotional disclosure on depression severity and use of defensive mechanisms in depressed patients. *Bimonthly Scientific – Research, Shahed University*. 18-93.
- Ramadani, Shams Esfand Abad, & Tahmasevi, Sh. (2007). Study of Emotional outcomes of attachment styles in students. *Research on Psychological Health, Tehran University of Teacher Training, Excellence in Stress Psychology*, 1 (1).
- Ruuttu, T., Pelkonen, M., Holi, M., & Karlsson (2006). The defense style questionnaire (DSQ-40) in adolescents. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 194(2). 105.
- Stein, M. (2006). The relationship between post-natal depression and mother- child interaction, *British Journal of psychiatry*. 158, 46-52.
- UNICEF. (2007). Which skills are life skills? Available at: http://www.unicef.org/life_skills.