



THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY IN THE MANIFESTATION OF DYSFUNCTIONAL COGNITIONS IN THE EMERGING ADULT

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Abstract

This article presents the results of the investigation of the mediating role of psychological flexibility in the manifestation of dysfunctional cognitions in the emerging adult. A lot consisting of 212 young people were interviewed with the Acceptance and Involvement Questionnaire (AAQ-II), the Metacognition Questionnaire-30 (MCQ-30) and the Cognitive Scheme Questionnaire (YSQ-S3) - Deprivation and Abandonment Schemes in the Separation Domain and Failure Schema in the Autonomy Domain.

The analysis of the Mediating Role of the Psychological Inflexibility on early maladaptive schemas is a first in this area. The results have shown how the Psychological Inflexibility, measured with AAQ-II, acted as a mediator of the effect of the Separation Schemas (Deprivation and Abandonment) on the Autonomy Schema (Failure). The Psychological Inflexibility seems to have a mediating role in the relationship between the Metacognitive Beliefs and the Scheme of Autonomy (Failure). Consequently, the Psychological Inflexibility seems to play a relevant role in the manifestation of maladaptive or dysfunctional cognitions schemas. This result has practical implications in the organising personal development and behavioural optimization groups in emerging adults.

Keywords: *psychological flexibility, early maladaptive patterns, metacognitive beliefs, emerging adult.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article presents the results of the investigation of the interrelationships between the maladaptive cognitive patterns of Separation and Autonomy, Dysfunctional Metacognitive Beliefs and Psychological Inflexibility. Psychological /Behavioural flexibility is characteristic of a behaviour susceptible to adaptive changes. This is measured according to the changes related to the situation differences, where a situation persists, and may take the form of a change in response or of a change in strategy. Changes in tactics or strategy, which are proof of a taken choice, are demonstrated to be possible from an exceedingly early age on the path of individual development and they also allow overcoming the difficulties caused by immaturity. In fact, during the stage of the concrete operations (between 7-8 to 10-11 years of age), as they interact with more people and encounter a multitude of points of view, the children begin to give up the idea that there is a single and absolutely correct and wrong standard and they can take into account now several aspects of a situation (Papalia, 2013).

The psychological flexibility is the ability to stay in touch with the present moment, regardless of thoughts, feelings and unpleasant happenings felt or experienced, acting based on the present situation and thus on personal values and beliefs. During their adolescence and emerging maturity, young people are affected by insecurity, then, as they mature and reach engagement / involvement in the context of relativism, based on their own beliefs and values, despite insecurity and recognition of other valid possibilities (Papalia, 2013). Along with the initiative and the orientation to the goals, flexibility facilitates the transition of emerging adults to the workplace and reduces the number of perceived failures (Blustein, Juntunen and Wonhtington, 2000).

Flexibility is also the middle ground between rigidity and freely chosen commitments, which is why we believe this it is a capacity that needs to be developed and cultivated in young people. After reviewing the literature we can conclude that there is significant evidence on the value of psychological flexibility in the development and manifestation of healthy (Kashdan, 2010; Bonnano et al., 2004) and resilient personality (Block and Block, 2006; Rizeanu, 2013).

We first assumed that psychological inflexibility mediates the relationship between maladaptive cognitive patterns in the Areas of Separation/Rejection and Autonomy/Poor Performance, considering that these areas are closely related to lack of initiative, avoidant behaviour of the young „NEETs” and mood disorders. Secondly, we assumed that psychological inflexibility mediates the relationships between metacognitive beliefs and the Autonomy-Failure Schemas.

2. OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. OBJECTIVE

The main aim of research is to find out the mediating role of psychological flexibility in the manifestation of dysfunctional cognitions schemas in the emerging adult.

2.2. HYPOTHESES

- a. The Psychological Inflexibility acted as a mediator in the relationship between the Separation and Autonomy Schemas.
- b. The Psychological Inflexibility acted as a mediator in the relationship of the Negative Metacognitions with the Failure Schema.
- c. The Psychological Inflexibility was a mediator of the relationship between The Metacognitions Control and the Failure Schema.

3. METHODS

3.1. THE RESEARCH GROUP

The research group consists of 212 people, aged between 19 and 30 years ($M = 24.3$, $AS = 3.2$), of which 84% come from urban areas, and 16% from rural areas. 31% are students, 23% student-employees, 25% employees and 21% NEET (acronym for Not in Education, Employment, or Training). According to the 2019 Eurostat report, 11.5% of males and 27.8% of females aged 20 to 34 have this NEET status (source: ec.europa.eu).

3.2. INSTRUMENTS

Acceptance and Action Questionnaire II (as known as AAQ-II) (Racu și Lungu, 2019; Bond, 2011) which measures the psychological flexibility and the experiential avoidance. It consists of 7 items that are evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never true; 7 = always true). The items reflect the reluctance to experience unwanted emotions and thoughts (such as „I am afraid of my feelings”, „I worry that I cannot control my worries and feelings”) and the individual’s inability *to be* in the present moment and to behave according to the action directed towards value when he experiences psychological events that could undermine him (for instance „My painful experiences and memories prevent me from living a life I would appreciate”, „Painful memories prevents me from leading a fulfilled life”). The scale has shown a good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Metacognition Questionnaire-30 (also known as MCQ-30) (Wells, Cartwright-Hatton, 2004). The MCQ-30 is a shorter version of the well-known MCQ-65. Thus, this is a 30 items scale measured in a Likert system in 4 points (1 = do not agree; 4 = strongly agree) which contains the following five factors: Positive beliefs about

worries, negative beliefs about uncontrollability and danger related to worries, beliefs about the need to control thoughts, cognitive confidence, and cognitive self-awareness.

MCQ-30 has shown a good internal consistency, convergent validity, and an acceptable test retesting reliability, $\alpha = .92$ (Bond, 2011).

Cognitive Scheme Questionnaire - Short Form 3 (also known as YSQ-S3) consists of 114 items and measures eighteen cognitive schemas. For this article, we chose to analyse only three of these schemas: the Deprivation and the Abandonment Schemas in the Separation Domain and the Failure Schema in the Autonomy Domain (Young, Klosko, Weishaar, 2003).

4. RESULTS

From *Table 1* we observe that the psychological inflexibility ($M = 18.5$, $AS = 6.73$, $\alpha = .87$) is significantly and positively correlated with all the analysed variables: with the Failure Schema ($M = 7.5$, $AS = 3.5$, $r = .56$, $\alpha = .89$), Separation - Abandonment and Deprivation Schemas ($M = 7.8$, $AS = 3.5$, $r = .43$, $\alpha = .86$), as well as with the Positive Metacognitive Beliefs ($M = 13.9$, $AS = 3.6$, $r = .26$, $\alpha = .75$), with the Negative ones ($M = 13.08$, $AS = 3.6$, $r = .55$, $\alpha = .76$) and with those related to the need of controlling thoughts ($M = 13.5$, $AS = 3.5$, $r = .36$, $\alpha = .78$).

	2	3	4	5	6	Med.	SD	α
1.Failure	.56**	.43**	.12	.44**	.32**	7.52	3.56	.89
2.Inflexibility	-	.48**	.26*	.55**	.36**	18.55	6.73	.87
3.Separation		-	.37**	.38**	.34**	7.88	3.55	.86
4.Positive metacognition			-	.24*	.31**	13.9	3.66	.75
5.Negative metacognition				-	.46**	13.08	3.65	.76
6. Metacognition control					-	13.55	3.57	.78

Table 1. Descriptive data, internal consistency, and correlations between the analysed variables

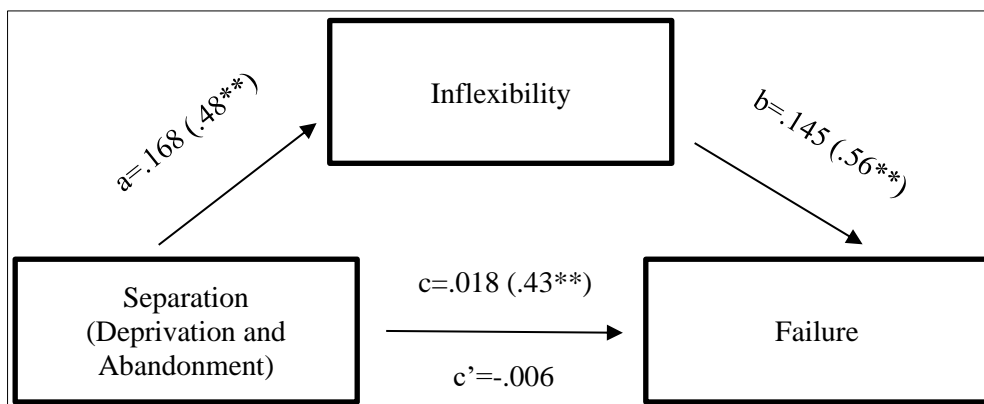
4.1 MEDIATION ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECT OF THE SEPARATION SCHEMA ON THE FAILURE SCHEMA

Mediation analysis (Bootstrapping type) were performed to estimate the direct and indirect effects using PROCESS (Hayes, Preacher, 2014). The predictor variables were Separation Schemas, Positive and Negative Metacognitions, and Metacognitions Control.

The mediation analysis revealed that Psychological Inflexibility acted as a mediator in the relationship between the Separation Schema and Autonomy (as shown in *Figure 1*, where the shown values are the path coefficients and the Pearson

correlation coefficients. The c-coefficient refers to the total effect of the separation schemas on the Failure Schema, while the c-prime coefficient refers to the direct effect).

The Separation Schema (Deprivation and Abandonment) significantly predicted the proposed mediator variable (Psychological inflexibility, path a: $ET = .168, p = .001$), but not the dependent variable Failure (the c path or the total effect: $ET = 0.18, p = .27$). Psychological inflexibility significantly predicted Failure (path b: $ET = .145, p = .0001$) and the indirect effect of Separation (Deprivation + Abandonment) on Failure was statistically significant (ab path), with a point estimate of .024 (95 %).



4.2 MEDIATION ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECT OF THE METACOGNITIONS ON THE FAILURE SCHEMA

In the first mediation analysis, the Psychological Inflexibility was a significant mediator in the relationship between the Positive Metacognitive Beliefs (PMB) and the Failure Schema, as shown in *Figure 2*.

The Positive Metacognitive Beliefs (PMB) predicted Psychological Inflexibility (path a: $ET = .374, p = .002$), but did not predict the Failure Schema (path c or total effect $ET = .030, p = .82$). However, the Psychological Inflexibility was a significant predictor of the Failure Schema (path b: $ET = .142, p = .001$). The estimated point of the Indirect Effect (path ab) was .053 (95%).

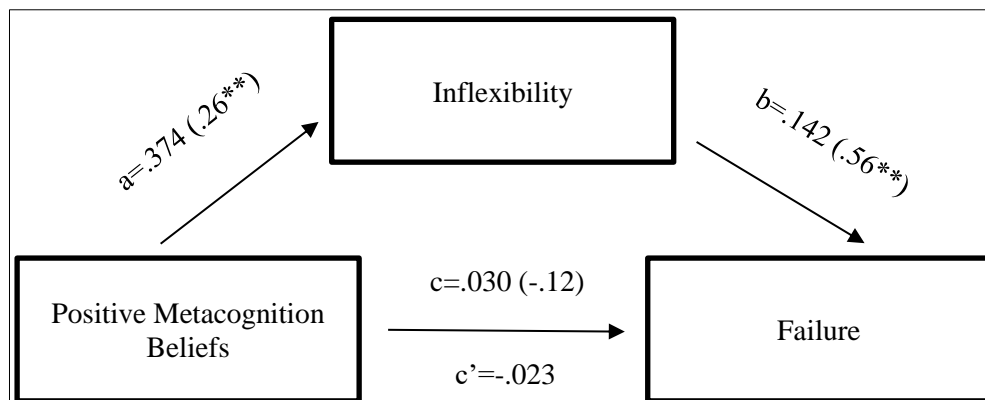


Figure 2. Analysis diagram of the Mediation Effect exerted by Psychological Inflexibility on the relationship between Positive Metacognitions and Failure Schema.

In the second mediation analysis, the Psychological Inflexibility acted as a mediator in the relationship of the Negative Metacognitions with the Failure Schema. Negative Metacognitions predicted Psychological Inflexibility (path a: $ET = .652$, $p = .001$) and predicted the Failure Schema (path c or total effect $ET = .165$, $p = .04$), as shown in *Figure 3*.

The last prediction lost its significance when Psychological Inflexibility was included in the model (path c' or direct effect $ET = -.072$, $p = .52$); however, the Psychological Inflexibility significantly predicted the Failure Schema (path b: $TE = .137$, $p = .0006$). The Indirect Effect was significant (ab pathway), with a point estimate of .093 (95%).

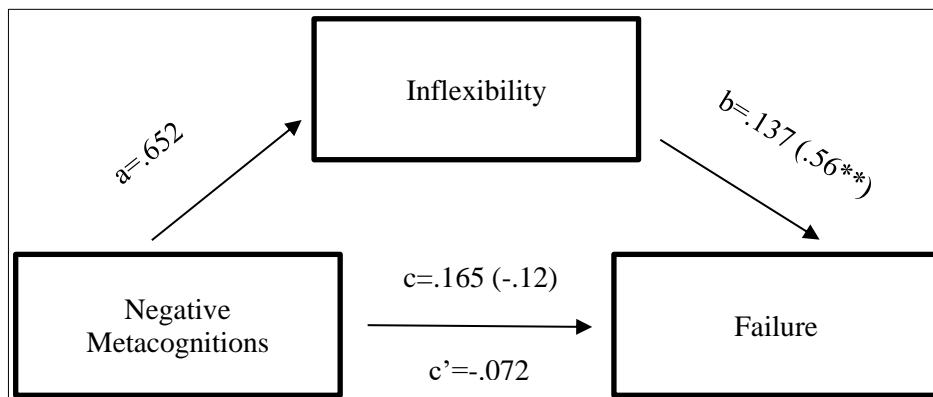


Figure 3. Analysis diagram of the Mediation Effect exerted by Psychological Inflexibility on the relationship between Negative Metacognitions and Failure Schema

Finally, the third mediation analysis revealed that the Psychological Inflexibility was a mediator of the relationship between The Metacognitions Control and the Failure Schema. The need to control the thoughts predicted Psychological Inflexibility (path a: $ET = .627$, $p = .001$), but did not predict the Failure Schema (path c or total effect: $ET = .075$, $p = .46$), as shown in *Figure 4*.

The last prediction lost its significance when the Psychological Inflexibility was included in the model (path c' or direct effect: $ET = -.012$, $p = .85$); however, the Psychological Inflexibility was a significant predictor of the Failure Schema (path b: $TE = .137$, $p = .0001$). The Indirect Effect was significant (ab pathway), with a point estimate of .63 (SE = .063, 95%).

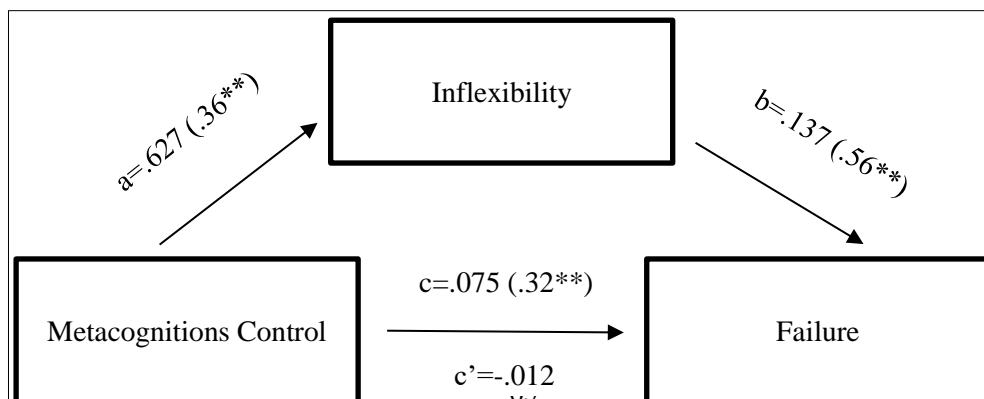


Figure 4. Analysis diagram of the Mediation Effect exerted by Psychological Inflexibility on the relationship between Metacognitions Control and the Failure Schema.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As the documentation has shown, the analysis of the Mediating Role of the Psychological Inflexibility on early maladaptive patterns is a first in this area. The results have shown how the Psychological Inflexibility, measured with AAQ-II, acted as a mediator of the effect of the Separation Schema (Deprivation and Abandonment) on the Autonomy Schema (Failure). Also, the Psychological Inflexibility seems to have a mediating role in the relationship between the Metacognitive Beliefs and the Schema of Autonomy (Failure). Consequently, the Psychological Inflexibility seems to play a relevant role in the manifestation of maladaptive or dysfunctional schema cognitions. This result has practical implications in the organising personal development and behavioural optimization groups. Thus, increasing psychological flexibility becomes one of the priority issues, being correlated, among others, as the studies presented, with the quality of life and the mental well-being.

The Psychological Flexibility is not a state of happiness or ease, but an ability to navigate in flexible manner through the changing and challenging demands of life, as well in the times when the difficult thoughts and feelings arise. Thus, the perspective from which the psychological health is assessed includes the way the individual is functioning, in relation with different areas of life (Rizeanu, 2014). According to Kashdan and Rottenberg (2010), a healthy person is someone who can manage himself in the uncertain and unpredictable world around him, where the novelty and the change are the norm and not the exception. Increasing the flexibility is the main desideratum of the ACT therapeutic method, developed by Hayes and his collaborators (Hayes et al, 2006) and a number of researches found significant result in connection with obsessive compulsive disorder (Twohig et al., 2015; Rizeanu, 2020), clinical perfectionism (Limburg et al, 2017). The research of Hayes et al. (2006) found that psychological flexibility promotes a better quality of life, the individual creating adaptive relational contexts including his internal experiences. Craske et al. (2014) reported the link of psychological inflexibility with social anxiety. ACT therapeutic method targets unsafe control and avoidance behaviours, which is why its core techniques for engaging to action are an important aspect of the behavioural optimization intervention arsenal over the *NEET emerging adult*.

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