



Journal of Fundamentals
of Mental Health



Mashhad University
of Medical Sciences



Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
Research Center

Original Article

The psychological profile of university students with and without a disciplinary record: A comparative study

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Abstract

Introduction: The present research aimed to compare the psychological profile of university students with and without a disciplinary record.

Materials and Methods: The statistical populations of this descriptive and causal-comparative study, included all Ferdowsi University of Mashhad undergraduates with a verdict issued by the university committee on discipline in the academic years of 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 and all undergraduates with no disciplinary record in the same academic year. A sample of 200 undergraduates was selected from each population with the purposive sampling method. Both groups responded to the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28) and NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI). Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data.

Results: The results showed significant differences in depression ($P=0.001$), anxiety ($P=0.006$), and overall mental health scores ($P=0.01$) between two groups. Similarly, significant differences were found in neuroticism ($P=0.001$), openness to experience ($P=0.001$), agreeableness ($P=0.001$), and conscientiousness ($P=0.001$). Students with a disciplinary record showed more psychological problems than those without a disciplinary record. Moreover, they had higher scores for negative traits and lower scores for positive traits.

Conclusion: Based on these findings, students with disciplinary records may have some special personality problems and need more psychological help. Also, these findings can contribute to developing disciplinary rules to prevent student infractions.

Keywords: Disciplinary record, Infractions, Mental health, Personality traits, University students

Please cite this paper as:

Sharekian H, Aali Sh, Rasoolzadeh Tabatabaei SK, Moradi Tavalaei A. The psychological profile of university students with and without a disciplinary record: A comparative study. *Journal of Fundamentals of Mental Health* 2023 May-Jun; 25(3): 161-167.

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Received: May. 21, 2022

Accepted: Feb. 21, 2023

Introduction

Students' admission to the university and beginning a new period of life and new experiences, such as a dormitory lifestyle, is stressful for many students and can affect their personal, social, and academic life. It can also threaten mental health and be followed by mental, cultural, and economic pressures. Students can face problems adapting to the university and dorm life and show misbehavior such as defiance, insolence, theft, and substance or alcohol abuse (1,2). The evidences point to the high prevalence of substance and alcohol abuse among university students (3).

University students' social and psychological health has always been a concern for curriculum designers, and supporting university students' mental well-being is essential to achieve the primary goal of university life, that is, the delivery of high-quality instructions and making positive changes in students upon graduation (4-6). To maintain peace and discipline at university and prevent more minor adaptive behaviors in management, there is always a Committee On Discipline (COD) in universities, which is in charge of monitoring student behavior and, at the same time, keeping up their spirits and self-confidence. When misbehaviors occur, the COD interferes and makes the required interventions when students complain about a specific issue (7).

There are more concerns about university students' mental health (8). The prevalence of mental disorders is about 30% in students with a bachelor's degree, and two common issues are depression and anxiety (9). Related studies show that university students are at a high risk of psychosis and mental disorders (10,11). University students' mental problems such as depression, psychosis, and misbehaviors such as alcohol and substance abuse can adversely affect their physical and mental health, quality of life, and academic achievements, also damage their memory, alertness, cognition, and be followed by sexual harassment (5,12-16). Misbehaving students can easily break down discipline in the immediate context or show aggressive behavior and cause emotional and behavioral problems (17).

Conclusively, mental health issues are among the most critical factors involved in behavioral abnormalities. One factor affecting mental health is personality, which can affect all aspects of personal and social life, and less

adaptive personality traits can severely disrupt standard life (18). There are many theoretical definitions for personality (19-21). A significant approach to personality is the big-five model, which elaborates on five factors or five main dimensions of personality, including extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Each of these five major factors has sub-categories, which form an individual's personality (22). Eysenck's study and many other studies showed that some personality types are more likely to lead to criminal behaviors than others (23-26).

The keypoint of the present study is in considering the influential role of mental health in the willingness for risky behaviors and the effect of personality on mental health. More importantly, no similar research has been conducted to explore the direct effect of personal and environmental predictors on university students' breakdown of discipline. The present study explored whether the target population's psychological profile, mental health, and personality traits differed across two groups, with and without a disciplinary record. The present findings can help to promote university students' mental health and reduce the rate of misbehavior at the university.

Materials and Methods

The present research was descriptive and causal-comparative study. The two research populations included, firstly, all undergraduates of the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad penalized by the university Committee On Discipline (COD) in the academic years of 2018-19 and 2019-2020 and, secondly, all undergraduates with no disciplinary record in the same academic year based on the university rules (7). As the latter was limited, a census was used to recruit all students with a disciplinary record. Two hundred participants with informed consent were entered into the first research population. Also, 200 students with no disciplinary record were entered into the second group; the sampling method was purposive.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Students with a disciplinary record: being an undergraduate at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad in the academic years of 2018-19 or 2019-2020, having broken down disciplinary rules enlisted in the University Disciplinary Code, having a proven case of infraction for which a verdict has been issued

Students with no disciplinary record: being an undergraduate at the same university and time, being similar in terms of age, sex, marital status, academic year, and field of study to another research group, having no disciplinary record. The exclusion criterion is the lack of consent to continue the research.

Research instruments

A) *General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28)*: Goldberg's GHQ has been used in many academic research projects. This questionnaire includes 28 items in 4 categories physical problems, anxiety, depression, and social action. All items are scored on a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from 0 to 3). A higher score represents a healthier state of health. Williams, Goldberg, and Marri (1988) reported that the validity of the questionnaire was about 0.80 (27). The sensitivity, specificity, and total score were estimated at 0.86, 0.77, and 0.70, respectively (28). In the present research, Cronbach's alpha for physical problems, anxiety, disrupted social actions, and depression, the overall score was 0.81, 0.88, 0.75, 0.90, and 0.92, respectively.

B) *NEO five-factor inventory (NEO-FFI)*: The 60-item version of the NEO inventory addresses five major dimensions of personality, including neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, which are rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The validity and reliability of this questionnaire have been reported as acceptable. The Persian version of this inventory was standardized by Garousi Farshi among Iranian university students (29). Cronbach's alpha was estimated in the present research as 0.75, 0.57, 0.51, 0.56, and 0.66 for neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, respectively.

After getting the required permissions, the questionnaires were submitted to all students coming to the COD to receive the written verdict; participation was based on the student's willingness. Two hundred eighteen questionnaires were returned, yet 18 were discarded for incomplete information. To access students with no disciplinary record,

considering the coronavirus pandemic, the online version of the questionnaires was sent by the COD to a sample of 200 students who were similar to the participants in the other group in terms of demographic variables. The descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (independent-samples T-test) were used to analyze the data in SPSS-26.

Results

In term of demographic variables, the mean and standard deviation of participants' age in the first group was 23.56 ± 2.94 years; 68% of them were female; 86% were single, 79% were B.A./B.S. students, 13.5% M.A./M.S. students and 7.5% Ph.D. candidates, 34.5% were majoring in technical and engineering sciences, 20% in basic sciences and agriculture, and 45.5% in humanities. In the second research group (students without a disciplinary record), the mean and standard deviation of the age was 22.79 ± 5.79 years, 61.5% were female, 86.5% were single, 80% of the participants were B.A./B.S. students, 14.5% M.A./M.S. students, and 5.5% Ph.D. candidates, 35% were majoring in technical and engineering sciences, 18.5% in basic sciences and agriculture and 46.5% in humanities.

Table 1 represents the scores of the variables and the independent-sample T-test results—initially, the assumptions of the independent-sample T-test were tested. Kolmogorov-Smirnov's test checked the normality of distribution. Mental health and its dimensions showed not to be normally distributed among the participants ($P < 0.05$). Among personality traits, the distribution of data was normal for neuroticism, openness to experience, and conscientiousness ($P > 0.05$) but not for extraversion and agreeableness ($P < 0.05$). As the independent-samples T-test is robust, it can still be run if the normality assumption is not met. In testing the homogeneity of variance by the F-test, if the equality of variance was confirmed, the independent-sample T-test results with equal variances were consulted. Otherwise, the T-test results with unequal variances were used. A summary of T-test results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The results related to general health and personality traits of the students with and without a disciplinary record (independent T-test)

Variable	Group	Mean	SD	F	P	T	df	P
Physical problems	With a record	5.96	4.39	7.18	0.008	0.40	381.06	0.68

	Without a record	5.80	3.55					
Anxiety	With a record	7.39	5.61	26.88	0.001	2.78	376.66	0.006
	Without a record	5.98	4.40					
Disrupted social action	With a record	7.40	3.19	0.15	0.69	-1.19	398.00	0.23
	Without a record	7.76	2.84					
Depression	With a record	7.02	5.77	17.63	0.001	3.97	383.33	0.001
	Without a record	4.92	4.74					
Mental health	With a record	27.77	14.17	1.30	0.25	2.46	398.00	0.01
	Without a record	24.47	12.60					
Neuroticism	With a record	28.40	8.00	2.97	0.08	3.56	398.00	0.001
	Without a record	35.73	6.92					
Extraversion	With a record	34.26	5.97	11.43	0.001	-0.065	375.40	0.51
	Without a record	34.61	4.65					
Openness to experience	With a record	37.05	5.04	0.57	0.44	-8.54	398.00	0.001
	Without a record	41.41	5.12				398.00	
Agreeableness	With a record	41.06	5.03	2.26	0.13	-4.24	398.00	0.001
	Without a record	43.38	5.87				398.00	
Conscientiousness	With a record	39.72	6.03	0.22	0.63	-3.24	398.00	0.001
	Without a record	41.67	6.00					

As indicated in Table 1, the two research groups differed significantly in the mean scores of anxiety ($P= 0.005$, $t= 2.78$), depression ($P= 0.001$, $t= 3.97$), overall mental health ($P= 0.01$, $t= 2.46$), neuroticism ($P= 0.001$, $t= 3.56$), openness to experience ($P= 0.001$, $t= -8.54$), agreeableness ($P= 0.001$, $t= -4.24$), and

conscientiousness ($P= 0.001$, $t= -3.24$). Anxiety, depression, and neuroticism are significantly higher in university students with a disciplinary record. However, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness prevail more in students without a disciplinary record.

Discussion

The present study showed that physical problems, anxiety, and depression prevailed significantly more in students with a disciplinary record. Thus, it can be concluded that the mental health of students with a disciplinary record is lower than normal. Among the personality traits, the mean neuroticism score was higher in students with a disciplinary record. In contrast, the mean scores of openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were significantly higher in students without a disciplinary record. It can be argued that positive personality traits are more potent in students without a disciplinary record than in their counterparts. The findings related to mental health were consistent with several studies (2,5,30-35). Several researchers showed a significant correlation between depression and personality. Also, they mentioned that

criminals and delinquents have more anxiety, depression, obsessive thought, somatization, interpersonal sensitivity, aggression, psychosis, and neurosis and less sympathetic, less approval motivation than others (31,32).

Another research revealed that students with no verdict have more adaptive skills and better stress management skills than those with verdicts (33). In another study, researchers reported a significant correlation between social adaptation and mental health, also poor social adaptation and mental health were observed among students with a disciplinary record than ordinary students (34). Baik et al. maintained that university students who experienced mental disorders did not use appropriate strategies in the face of challenges and may show high-risk behaviors such as aggression and substance abuse (4). Raghuvanshi showed that the chances of committing a crime are higher in people with a

mental disorder (31). The sample size in studies conducted by Mikaili and Madadi Imamzade and Heidari and Adli was smaller than the present research (33,34). Thus, it can be concluded that in all the mentioned research, mental health, depression, and anxiety were undesirable among delinquents (compared to ordinary counterparts). It is consistent with the present finding that stated a higher rate of depression and anxiety in university students with a disciplinary record than in other groups.

A comparison of personality traits between the two groups revealed statistically significant differences. These findings were consistent with several studies (14,15,30,35-37). Researchers investigated the correlation between personality traits and plagiarism in university students based on NEO big five models. The results showed a statistically significant negative correlation between plagiarism and conscientiousness and agreeableness on the one hand and a positive correlation with neuroticism (37). In Iran, Bayrami compared personality traits and coping strategies between students with a disciplinary record and ordinary students. Students with a disciplinary record showed higher neuroticism scores than others. Also, they received lower scores in agreeableness and conscientiousness scores than ordinary students (15). Another study investigated the effect of school attachment, personality traits, and academic achievement on differentiating between disciplined and undisciplined students in Tabriz. The results showed that self-regulation, attitude to school, academic achievement, attitude to teacher/class, and finally openness could strongly distinguish disciplined and undisciplined students (14). Mahdavi and Zarei explored the correlation between army officers' personality traits and military servants' infractions in a military garrison in Tehran. They found that openness and conscientiousness were significantly and negatively correlated with the rate of infractions (38). The research findings mentioned above are consistent with the present research showing the significant association between personality traits and the breakdown of discipline. Personality traits are significantly correlated with the occurrence of unlawful behavior. To explain the cause of being more neurotic in students with a disciplinary record, it can be argued that students generally face specific university problems in exams, projects,

nutrition, tuition fee, and dress code. Students with lower emotional stability might fail to act appropriately in the face of these ordinary issues. Research showed that neurotic individuals struggle to cope with others and tolerate mental pressures. Neurotic behaviors can also lead to risky behaviors such as substance or alcohol abuse, defiance and insolence, intimidation, and illegal sex affairs.

Openness to experience was another personality trait that significantly distinguished the two research groups. This trait involves flexibility in the face of new experiences and change, so the first group needs to be more capable of accepting university rules and regulations. Undisciplined students tend more to act as they wish. This finding is similar to the latest study conducted in 2022 (35).

The findings also showed a significant difference between the two groups regarding agreeableness. Students with a disciplinary record were less agreeable than those without a record, so agreeable students always try to agree with others, show sympathy and empathy, and, thus, tend less to complain about rules; instead, they try more to abide by the existing rules. On the contrary, students with a disciplinary record suffer from less agreeableness than others. They seldom respect agreed-upon rules and find it hard to cooperate with others.

Conscientiousness was another personality trait that significantly distinguished the two groups of students. The existing studies show that conscientiousness can act preventively against crime and cheating. Researchers maintained that conscientious, more responsible students act honestly to achieve academic success (39). Some other researchers reported a negative correlation between cheating at university and conscientiousness (40). Similarly, students with a disciplinary record in the present research reported a lower conscientiousness. Due to a lower perceived responsibility, these students did not adhere to the university rules. They feel less accountable than other students and may need to be more motivated to progress than their conscientious counterparts. Researchers showed that conscientiousness is correlated with motivation and academic achievement, and they do not feel obliged to obey rules and can easily violate them (41). Similarly, Wilcox et al. showed that the probability of criminal behaviors is higher in people with low conscientiousness and

agreeableness in places where the chances of crime are moderate to high (42).

The special issue of this article can influence the desire of students to participate in this research, and finding volunteer students was more time-consuming. In light of the present findings, it is recommended that individual psychotherapy sessions and consultations be held for students violating university rules to help reduce their depression and anxiety and promote their mental health.

Conclusion

The present research revealed that university students with a disciplinary record have lower

mental health, more personality problems, and experience more anxiety and depression. University officials should investigate the underlying sources of students' anxiety, tension, and depression. Solving these problems can significantly reduce the rate of students' infarctions and help to promote mental health.

Conflict of interest

Researchers have no conflict of interest, and there is no special foundation.

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