



Identity Styles and Sense of Coherence: the role of identity-processing strategies in global orientation to life

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ABSTRACT

The aims of the present study were to investigate the relationship between identity styles and sense of coherence [SOC]; and to examine possible gender differences in each of these variables. 100 students from an Iranian university completed Identity Styles Inventory [5], and Orientation to Life Questionnaire [1]. Data were analysed using Pearson's correlation coefficient, multiple regression, MANOVA and ANOVA. Results indicated informational style, normative style, and commitment were all positively related to SOC, but diffuse-avoidant style had negative correlation with SOC. Whereas normative and diffuse-avoidant styles and commitment significantly predicted SOC, informational style doesn't have a significant role in prediction. There were no significant gender differences in informational and normative identity styles and SOC; the only meaningful difference was found in diffuse-avoidant style scores (men had higher scores than women). In sum, the results revealed the style people use to interpret self-relevant information specifically are related with their SOC level, and generally can predict it.

Keywords: Identity styles; Sense of coherence

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of our study is investigating the significant relationship between identity styles and Sense of coherence [SOC] in students of one of the universities in Iran. SOC is the main construct of Antonovsky's (1987) salutogenic theory [1]. It refers to the extent to which one views the world, the individual environment, and life events as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful [13]. SOC seems to be a health promoting resource, which strengthens resilience and develops a positive subjective state of health [10]. However, in most studies, SOC has been considered as an independent and/or predictor variable (e.g., its strong association with health; see Eriksson & Lindström, 2007). In the present study, as one of a few studies that considers SOC as a criterion variable, we look at one of the essential characteristics beyond the individuals' SOC, that is self-identity. There are only a few researches that focus on studying identity and SOC [13]. One of the most important theories about identity formation is Berzonsky's (1990) social-cognitive model of identity processing styles. According to Berzonsky (2011), identity is a cognitive structure or self-theory, which provides a personal frame of reference for interpreting self-relevant information, solving problems, and making decisions [4,5]. Based on Berzonsky's (1990) theory, individuals differ in the strategies or styles they tend or prefer to use when dealing with identity issues and making personal commitment [4]. Could each of identity styles be led (or at least be associated) to a different point of view to life? Is there any significant relationship between identity styles with SOC?

According to Berzonsky's (1990) theory, self-identity provides interpretive context within which questions about the "meaning," "purpose," "fit" and "direction" of one's life are answered [4]. Three different social-cognitive identity processing styles are postulated within this model: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant [8]. Individuals with an informational processing style are skeptical of their own self-views and they intentionally seek out, process, and utilize identity-relevant information to personally resolve identity conflicts. In contrast, individuals with a normative processing style more automatically adopt a collective sense of identity by internalizing the standards and prescriptions of significant others and referent groups. Those with a diffuse-avoidant processing style are reluctant to confront and face up to identity conflicts; they procrastinate and delay as long as possible. Their actions

tend to be influenced more by immediate situational rewards and demands than personally informed decisions or normative standards [8].

Based on Antonovsky's (1987, 1996) theory, a person with a strong SOC will: wish to, be motivated to, cope (meaningfulness); believe that the challenge is understood (comprehensibility); believe that resources to cope are available (manageability) [2]. Therefore, it seems beyond the individual's SOC, there could be a special strategy (i.e., one of the identity styles) in interpreting information. But, the critical concern is the extent to which these theoretical self-constructs enable the person to cope, adapt, and make sense of the flux of events he or she experiences in everyday life [6]. Theoretically (regarding what we mentioned above), it seems reaching to stronger SOC needs abilities that would be found in people using informational or normative styles (if using their style would be functional), and who have a firm commitment. On the other hand, individuals who characteristically strive to avoid dealing with self-relevant issues may assume that their identity has been predetermined by fate or factors beyond their control [6], moreover, they couldn't be motivated to cope, or find the meaning beyond the events either, and consequently, it doesn't seem that they could reach to a strong SOC. We couldn't find any study that exactly considered these relationships before, but in some research that studied identity styles with similar constructs, both informational and normative styles positively correlated with hardiness and meaning in life [7, 12], while only informational style had positive relationship with aspects of personal wisdom (Beaumont, 2009). Diffuse-avoidant style had a negative relationship with all these constructs [7, 12]. Therefore, it is hypothesised that informational and normative styles and commitment would be positively correlated to and predict SOC, whereas diffuse-avoidant style negatively would be correlated with and predict SOC.

Finally, as an additional goal, we want to examine gender differences in each variable. Previous results are dissimilar with each other [13,5], by the way, as the final hypotheses of this study, it is hypothesised there would be significant gender differences in each of identity styles and SOC.

We hope that our results could provide some application for the counsellors. For instance, if the SOC level of client could be a sign of a special identity style, counsellor could help client to choose strategies that are more functional, and gain abilities that could have a positive influence on his/her SOC too.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and Procedure

The sample was recruited from all the students of Islamic Azad University-Science and Research Tehran branch in the country of Iran. The sample consisted of 100 participants (58% female) ranging in the age from 19 to 45 ($M = 27.23$, $SD = 4.64$). 50% of participants were bachelor students, 47% of them were students of master's degree, and only 3% were Ph.D. students. Using cluster sampling method, 100 students from four faculties have been selected as the sample group. Participants were asked to answer a demographic form and three questionnaires. Participation was voluntarily.

Measures

Identity styles

Identity styles were assessed with a Persian version of the Identity Style Inventory [5], which is a 40 item measure. It measures three identity styles: informational (11 items; e.g., "I've spent a lot of time and talked to a lot of people trying to develop a set of values that make sense to me"); normative (9 items; e.g., "I've more-or-less always operated according to the values with which I was brought up"); and diffuse-avoidant (10 items; e.g., "It doesn't pay to worry about values in advance; I decide things as they happen"). The ISI3 also includes an additional subscale that provides an index of level of commitment to one's identity (10 items; e.g., "I know what I want to do with my future"). Respondents indicate the degree to which each item is characteristic of himself or herself using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). After reverse scoring negatively worded items, total scores are based on summed responses for items composing each subscale [3]. On this study, Cronbach's alphas were respectively .52, .65, .80 and .76.

Sense of coherence

The Persian version of 13-Items Orientation to Life Questionnaire was used to measure SOC [14]. The SOC scale (13-items) is a short version of the SOC questionnaires (versus 29-items) which is developed by Antonovsky (1987) and consists of four meaningfulness items (e.g., "Do you have the feeling that you don't really care about what goes on around you?") [1], five comprehensibility items (e.g., "Has it happened in the past that you were surprised by the behaviour of people whom you thought you knew well?"), and four manageability items (e.g., "Has it happened that people on whom you counted disappointed you?") [13]. A high score represents a strong SOC and the range being [would be] between 13 and 91 points [1, 12]. Based on Eriksson, Lindström & Lilja's (2007) study, we will divide the total score to different levels [11].

A score of 13-63 points corresponded to a low SOC, 64-70 points to moderate SOC and 80-91 points to a high SOC [10]. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for subscales and total SOC-Persian version were: meaningfulness = .70, comprehensibility = .59, manageability = .51 and SOC (total) = .77.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among all variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among all variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Informational style	38.34	4.76				
2. Normative style	31.43	4.96	.257**			
3. Diffuse-avoidant style	27.68	7.27	-.079	-.042		
4. Identity commitment	36	6.48	.224*	.595**	-.395**	
5. Sense of coherence	53.83	10.76	$r_{xy(n=100)}$ $t_{(df=98)}$.236 2.404*	.441 4.864**	-.332 3.484**
						.558 6.657**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

The results of Pearson's correlations (Table 1) show informational and normative styles, and commitment were all positively related to SOC. In contrast, diffuse-avoidant style was negatively related to SOC. Using multiple regression, we analysed the possibility of prediction roles of identity styles on SOC. The regression analysis was significant ($R = .603$; $R^2 = .364$; $F(4, 95) = 13.582$, $P < .01$), and showed that identity styles could generally predict SOC. Based on the Regression Coefficients (Table 2), informational style didn't significantly predict SOC at all. Normative style and commitment positively predicted SOC; whereas diffuse-avoidant had negative role on prediction of SOC; and

Table 2. Regression coefficients

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
(Constant)	18.767	9.755		1.984*
Informational style	.207	.191	.092	1.082
Normative style	.447	.232	.206	1.986*
Diffuse-avoidant style	-.267	.137	-.180	-1.983*
commitment	.569	.191	.343	2.982**

Dependent variable: SOC.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

MONOVA and ANOVA were conducted to examine significant gender differences in each of these variables. MONOVA's results show there were no significant gender differences ($F(4, 95) = 2.235$; 1.898 ; $P < .05$, respectively). Results of ANOVAs for identity styles (informational, normative and diffuse-avoidant) and commitment are $F(1, 98) = .243$; $.542$; 6.889 and 1.470 ; $P < .05$, respectively. Therefore, the only significant difference was in diffuse-avoidant style, which men had higher scores than women.

The results showed there were no significant gender differences based on the subscales of SOC ($F(1, 98)$; comprehensibility = $.185$; manageability = 3.194 ; and meaningfulness = $.363$; $P < .05$, respectively).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In order to shed some light on the specific role of self-identity in the strength/weakness of SOC (as an important salutogenic construct), the current study, mainly studied the significant relationship that identity styles might be have with SOC. Pearson correlations showed the significant relationship between all of the identity styles and SOC, and the results of regression analysis showed identity styles generally can predict SOC. In other words, all of the Hypotheses about specific relationship between identity styles and SOC were supported. However, only part of the hypothesis regarding significant prediction role of identity styles on SOC has been supported. Likewise, the hypotheses about existing significant gender differences in identity styles and SOC have been supported partly. In the current section, we will discuss about the results precisely; later, we will present limitation, suggestion, and a brief conclusion [7].

Identity styles and SOC

As hypothesised, informational, normative styles and commitment were positively related to SOC, which are consistent with previous similar research [7]. The results suggest people who actively seek and intentionally choose their values; and who relies on the beliefs or rules has been told by important others; and the persons who have a clear self-standards, were all could have a well-formed SOC.

Based on our results, normative style and commitment positively predict SOC. These results are partly consistent with previous research [3]. Unexpectedly and unlike previous research, Informational style was the only style didn't significantly predict SOC. Whereas Beaumont (2009) found only informational style positively predicts self-actualization and self-transcendence [3].

Why informational style didn't have a significant prediction role with SOC, and why normative style had stronger relationship with SOC than this style? There could be three important explanations. First, the cultural context of the participants, were as what Berzonsky (1990) mentioned a relatively stable tradition-oriented. Generally [4], in this cultural context, the norms and values are prescribed. Using normative style might be more functional in this culture. Second, notice to the relatively low relationship between informational style and commitment ($r = .224, p < .05$). It could show some of the informative participants were still searching and evaluating information, hence, It seems if they would have a clear commitment (a meaningful frame of reference; Berzonsky, 2003) to rely on, they might be led to a strong SOC (e.g., interpreting the world more meaningfully). By the way, Berzonsky (2003) found use of an informational style was associated with psychological hardiness only when strength of commitment was low [7]. When commitment strength was high, utilization of an informational style was unrelated to hardiness [7, 8]. More research is needed to clarify the role of commitment and to find out whether utilization of an informational style may help to buffer individuals from the negative effects of stressors and conflicts [7] while the levels of SOC are low, or not. Last, participants' levels of SOC were low ($M = 53.83, Mod = 76$). As Beaumont (2009) mentioned when maturity of adjustment is considered, subtle differences emerge between informational and normative styles. So, normative people could reach to a low-moderate SOC, but it doesn't necessarily mean they could perceive their experiences more meaningful or strongly understandable. It is possible if the sample group had high SOC, informative people could have stronger SOC than normative ones. More research is needed to investigate our assumption [7, 4].

As hypothesised and consistent with previous research [7] diffuse-avoidant style negatively related to and predicted SOC [7]. These results show people with diffuse-avoidant style, who prefer avoidant strategy in difficulties, have weakness in viewing life as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful [11]. Diffuse-avoidance is associated with poorly integrated personal constructs that appear to reflect a fragmented sense of self [8]. It also involves strategic attempts to evade or obscure potentially negative self-relevant feedback [8]; consequently, they interpret their world with a disjointed frame of reference. This supports what Berzonsky (2003) mentioned that individuals who lack clear and stable views and beliefs about themselves and the world in which they live may be likely to view the world as chaotic, unpredictable and unmanageable [8]. Taken together, the results can provide a better picture of diffuse-avoiders. Diffuse-avoiders, not only avoid dealing with self-relevant conflicts and problems, they also act poorly on reaching to SOC. This strategy, and low SOC, could have a negative impact on their health. The results could also be used in therapeutic context. For example, client's weak SOC could show probably beyond this weakness, there is a fragmented sense of self and tending to use avoidance coping strategies.

The significant gender differences in each of variables

There were no significant gender differences in informational and normative styles, whereas men had higher scores in diffuse-avoidant style. These results are consistent with parts of results by [15]. Except, Soenens et al. (2005) found women had higher normative scores; although they were small. By the way, results of Khosrowshahi and Alilou (2012) are completely inconsistent with these results. They found women had higher scores in informational and normative styles; but there were no significant gender differences in diffuse-avoidant. Since the various results are inconsistent with each other, they cannot lead to a general explanation. In conclusion, more research is needed; particularly, for result possible reasons are behind using diffuse-avoidant style mostly by men in various contexts (i.e., Iran and other countries)[15,13,12].

Regarding SOC, whereas we didn't find any significant gender differences, Luyckx & et al. (2008) found woman scored lower on SOC. Due to the lack of enough information and studies, more research is needed to clarify whether gender differences exist on differentiation and SOC or not[13].

Limitations and Suggestions

First, due to the limited time for conducting this research, sample size was the least appropriate size for correlation studies. Second, it consisted of students; therefore, future research could focus on other populations. For example, the relationship between identity styles and SOC could be studied in individuals with personality disorders. Another limitation is the design of the study, which was correlational and cross-sectional; for considering causal effects of identity styles on SOC, future studies could be experimental. For example, SOC could be considered as a criterion for evaluating outcomes in therapeutic context. Furthermore, future studies could investigate to find answers for the question our study had been led to: what is the role of commitment between identity styles and SOC.

These results confirm the style people use to interpret self-relevant information significantly correlated to how they perceive their world, which in turn might have a positive/negative impact on their health. Based on our results, the role of identity styles in predicting the SOC is significant. However, mostly because our participants' SOC levels were all low, informational style didn't have a significant prediction role on viewing to life as meaningful and comprehensible. Besides, higher diffuse-avoidant scores in men, while it

predicts low SOC could be an important result that needs more investigation from both counsellors and researchers [11, 10].

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