

Leaving the beaten path of academic success: How Psychological Flexibility Affects First-Year Academic Adjustment



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01

Introduction



- ❖ Transition to higher education: a **crucial** and **difficult** period
 - FR/BE $\approx$ 60 % failure/dropout/reorientation rate in the first year (De Clercq et al., 2023)
 - EU 30–40 % of European students **do not complete their higher education studies** within the **expected timeframe** (European Commission, 2015)
 - 🌍 30–50 % of students worldwide **leave higher education without obtaining a degree** (Behr et al., 2020 ; OECD literature)
- ❖ **Student challenges:**
 - academic pressure
 - social adaptation
 - personal uncertainties (lack of personal effectiveness)
- ❖ **Impact:** Lower **performance & well-being** (Conley et al., 2014; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017)
 - **Need** : Understand what promotes success & well-being





Psychological flexibility (PF):

- a **key** resource for well-being & success during transition
- Emerging focus in research, but still underexplored (Hailikari et al., 2022; Asikainen & Katajavuori, 2021)

→ **Understanding how psychological flexibility shapes first-year students' academic adjustment**



02

Definition of psychological flexibility



The psychological flexibility

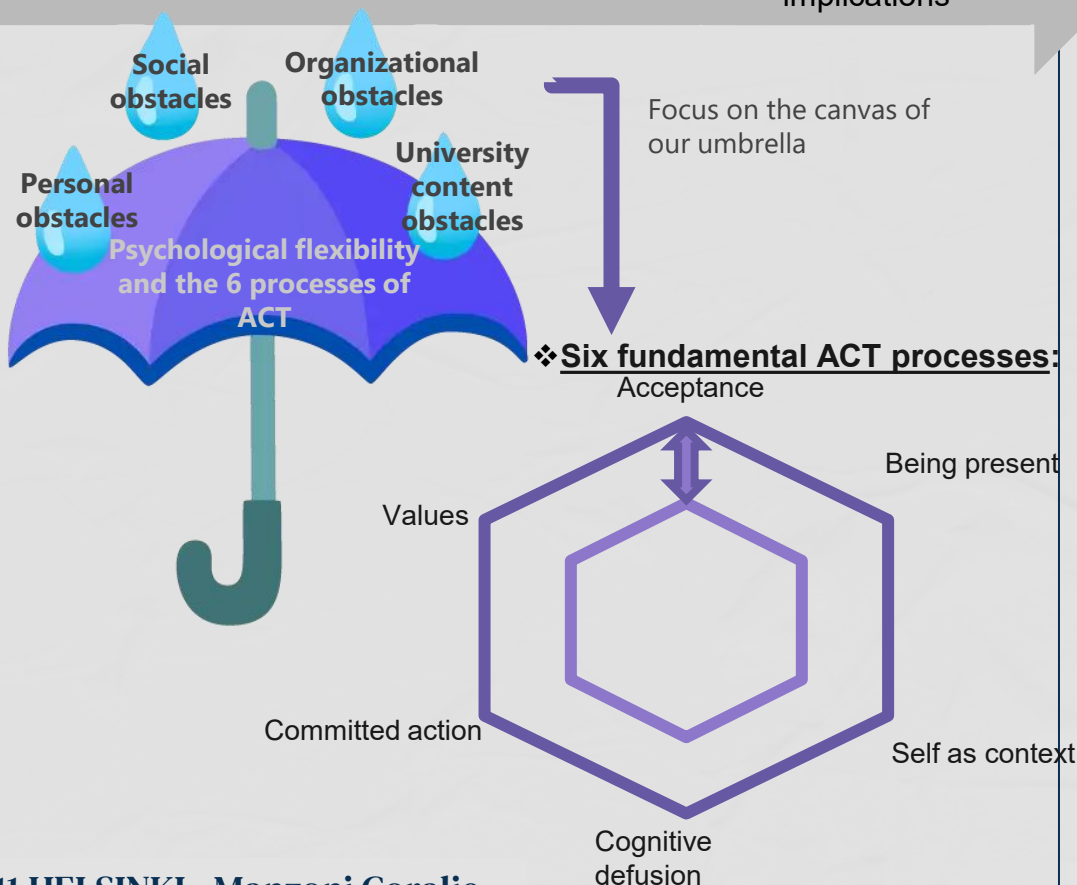
Dynamic and developable meta-process (Monestès, 2016)

❖ Purpose:

- manage **interference**
- Act **despite** discomfort
- Align behaviour with **personal values** and **well-being** (Cherry et al., 2021)

🧩 **Psychological flexibility** emerges from the **interaction** of **all six processes**.

These processes work **together**, in an **integrated** and **coordinated** way.





represent personally meaningful life directions that guide behaviors and decisions over time.

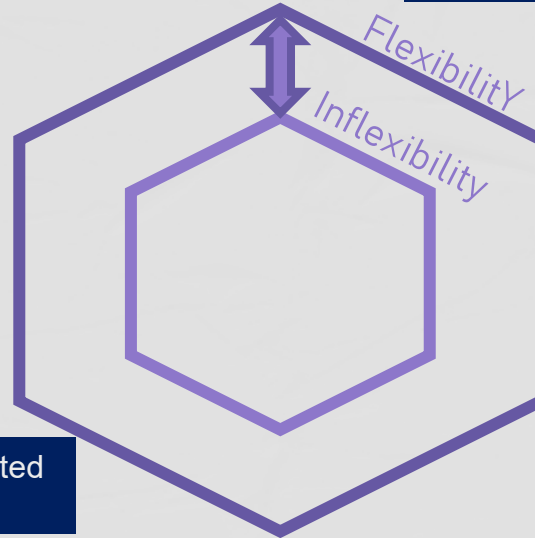
Values

Committed action

consists of taking meaningful and goal-directed steps despite challenges or discomfort.

Acceptance

involves making space for difficult thoughts and emotions instead of trying to avoid or control them.



Being present

refers to staying consciously connected to the current moment with openness and attention.

Self as a context

is the ability to observe thoughts and experiences from a broader perspective without being defined by them.

Cognitive Defusion

helps individuals distance themselves from unhelpful thoughts by seeing them as mental events rather than absolute truths.

03

Aim of the study



First-year students face multiple adjustment challenges

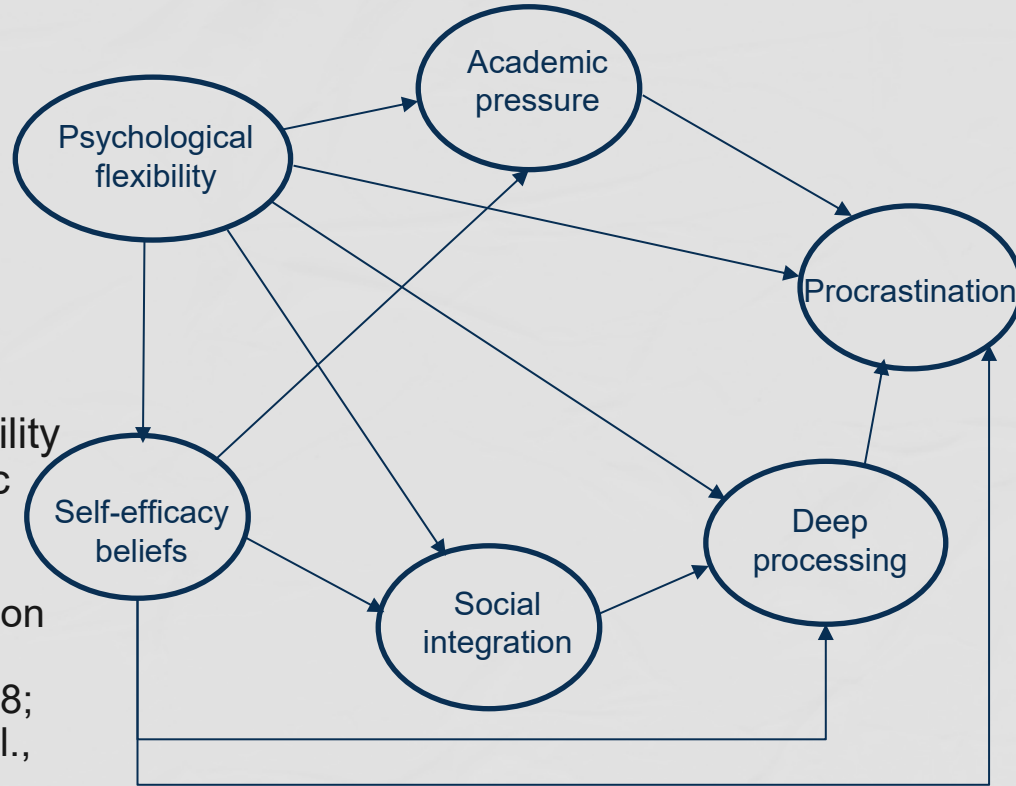
- Academic pressure
- Social integration
- Self-efficacy beliefs
- Deep processing
- Procrastination

Research Question

What role does psychological flexibility play in first-year students' academic adjustment?

 Based on ACT and higher education research

(Räsänen et al., 2016; Asikainen, 2018; Hailikari et al., 2021, 2022; Rähä et al., 2024; Martinie & Shankland, 2024)



04

Method



Sample

N = 772 first-year students aged 18 to 24 (♀: 566 ; ♂: 206)

Design

Data collected via self-reported questionnaire



In the lecture hall of UCLouvain



From 05 to 15 February 2024

Data analysis

- Structural equation modelling (SEM)
- CFA demonstrate a good fit of the scales with the data

	AIC	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	Chi ²
Effective Model	84115.226	0,038	0,911	0,903	0,056	1443.722

- Latent variables were measured using validated scales. The table below shows their internal consistency (Cronbach's α)

	Nber items	α Cronbach
Psychological flexibility	6	.713
Self-efficacy beliefs	7	.802
Academic pressure	6	.850
Social integration	6	.811
Procrastination	7	.899
Deep processing	6	.770

Questionnaire (example)

Variable	Nber items	Scale/ Exemple items	Process
Psychological flexibility (Gloster et al., 2021)	6	«Even if I sometimes daydream, I can focus on what is happening in important moments. »	Being present
		« If necessary, I can allow unpleasant thoughts and experiences to come without needing to get rid of them immediately. »	Acceptance
		« I can observe uncomfortable thoughts from a distance without letting them control me.	Cognitive defusion
		« Even when thoughts and experiences upset me, I can notice something like a sense of stability and calm within myself. »	Self as context
		« I determine what is important to me and decide where to devote my energy»	Values
		« "I commit fully to things that are important, useful, or meaningful to me. »	Committed action

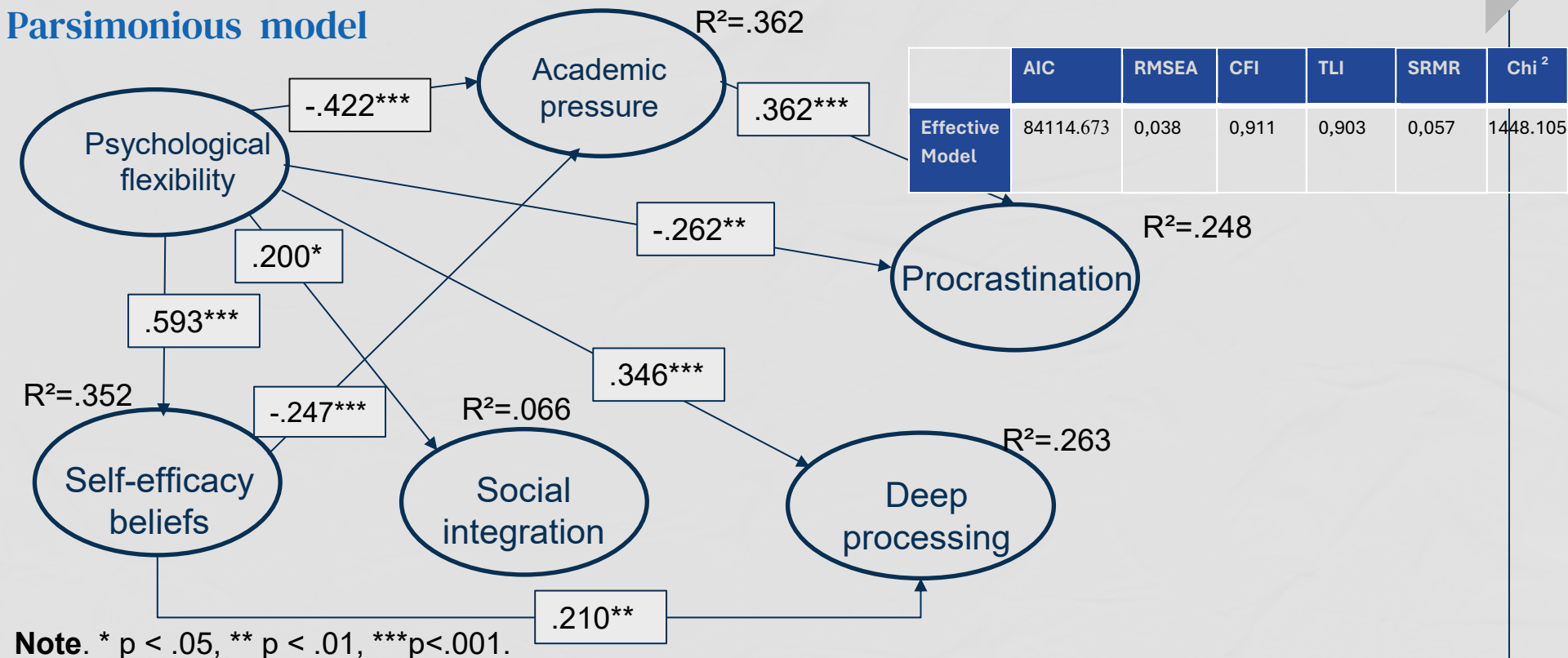
Variable	Nber d'items	Exemple
Self-efficacy beliefs	7	« When I have to learn something new, I am confident that I can succeed. »
Academic pressure	6	« I often have trouble sleeping because of study-related problems. »
Social integration	6	« I maintain friendly or cordial relationships with several people at the university (e.g., students, teachers). »
Procrastination	7	« I carefully organize my study time to make the most of it. »
Deep processing	6	« I check, in my notes or in a text, whether the theories, interpretations, or conclusions are sufficiently justified. »

05

Results



Parsimonious model



	AIC	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	Chi ²
Effective Model	84114.673	0,038	0,911	0,903	0,057	1448.105

06

Discussion



Limits

🧩 Key Predictors (*Dupont et al., 2015*)

- Entry characteristics
- Social environment
- Motivational beliefs

👨👩👦 Social Environment

- Link between family and psychological flexibility

📊 Additional analyses

- Gender distribution
- Faculty affiliation
- Psychological flexibility by faculty

Area for further investigation

📈 Stress measures

- Current: Self-report (subjective)
- Future: Physiological data (heart rate, EDA) (*Campanella et al., 2023*)

⌚ Model Limitations

- No causal relationships

Future perspective



Study 2 : longitudinal study

Explore how psychological flexibility relates to:

- Well-being (WHO-5, Panas, SWLS)
- Academic pressure
- Social integration
- Self-efficacy beliefs
- Deep processing
- Procrastination

Design:

- Participants: 2.700 students
- 3 time points: Beginning of Semester 1, Beginning of Semester 2 (N=586), End of Semester 2 (N= 473)
- Analysis: Cross-lagged modeling & latent growth analysis (still in discussion)

Future perspective



Study 3 : physiological study

Multimodal assessment of student adjustment

- **N = 1,000** students (self-report data)
- **N = 100** students wearing Fitbit Sense 2 smartwatches
- Physiological indicators: HR(V), EDA, sleep quality
- Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA)

Understanding daily stress dynamics

Real-time monitoring across a 3-week period
Within-person fluctuations in stress and recovery
Contextualized measures during lectures and daily life

Psychological flexibility in everyday life

- Examining links between PF and physiological stress regulation
- Comparing subjective and physiological indicators of well-being

Towards personalized support

- Data-informed interventions
- Individual adaptation trajectories during the first year

Thank you for your attention

Do you have any questions?



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