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Article

Psychological Flexibility and Inflexibility of University Students: An in-Depth Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Psychological flexibility allows individuals to accept and face life circumstances without avoiding or rigidly clinging to them, fostering adaptive responses guided by personal values. In contrast, psychological inflexibility involves patterns driven by negative thoughts and emotions that hinder present-moment adaptation. This study used semi-structured interviews to explore manifestations of psychological flexibility and inflexibility in 15 university students from the University of Magdalena, with a mean age of 20.13 years and a sample composed of 53.33% women. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed to examine participants' lived experiences. The findings revealed a tendency among students to attempt control over aversive internal events and to encounter difficulties in acting consistently with their values. These results underscore the need for interventions that enhance acceptance and committed action as strategies to foster academic and personal adjustment. The study highlights the importance of further examining the role of psychological flexibility in emotional regulation, decision-making, and student well-being, in order to inform mental health promotion and improve academic outcomes.

Keywords: psychological flexibility; psychological inflexibility; university students

1. Introduction

Psychological flexibility is one of the central concepts of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). ACT is a therapeutic model aimed at modifying the relationship individuals have with their thoughts and the influence these exert on their behavior so that the latter is guided by personal values rather than relational frames and verbal rules that are shaped through language [1]. Being psychologically flexible involves opening up to discomfort as an inevitable part of life while moving toward what is truly valuable [2] by setting aside internal struggles to focus on the here and now and persisting in or consistently adjusting one's behavior so that it aligns with one's chosen values.

Accordingly, human behavior is analyzed in relation to the context in which it occurs. The therapeutic approach of ACT is supported by the experimental analysis of language and human cognition that was developed extensively through relational frame theory. This theory highlights how language establishes connections that shape individuals' perceptions and interactions with the world [3,4].

The repertoire of behaviors that individuals learn and maintain often constitutes the means by which they evaluate, judge, and form opinions about their feelings and thoughts—referred to in ACT as private events—without necessarily representing the reality of their experiences accurately. Wilson and Luciano emphasized that the relationship between private events and actions is influenced by arbitrary interactions between personal history and verbal context, which results from numerous perspective frames converging in the emergence of self-dimensions [1].

In the present study, we aimed to qualitatively explore the manifestations of psychological flexibility and inflexibility in-depth among a group of university students. We further sought to identify the main acceptance or control strategies that the students deployed with respect to their

private experiences and the challenges presented by life as well as to understand the influence of these meanings on their behavior.

1.1. Conceptualization of Psychological Flexibility and Inflexibility

In ACT, psychological flexibility and inflexibility refer to patterns of behavior regulated by interconnected processes. These processes can either facilitate and expand opportunities for individuals to live according to their choices and values or, conversely, reduce and limit how they respond to their life experiences [2]. The Hexaflex model used in ACT comprises six processes that enable psychological flexibility: acceptance, cognitive defusion, self-as-context, contact with the present moment, connection with values, and committed action. In contrast, the processes that mediate psychological inflexibility are experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion, self-as-content, lack of contact with the present moment, lack of connection with values, and inaction [5].

Acceptance vs. Avoidance

Acceptance, the Latin root of which means “to receive” [6], involves opening up to pain and other difficult experiences without clinging to or rejecting them. Although culturally associated with suffering, acceptance is not resignation; rather, it is about building from one’s internal and external resources [2,7,8,9]. Meanwhile, experiential avoidance involves attempts to modify or suppress internal events to avoid discomfort, although this entails a high psychological cost [6,10].

Defusion vs. Fusion

Defusion is the ability to separate oneself from the verbal rules that influence one’s thoughts and behaviors. It allows individuals to distance themselves from their thoughts without eliminating them and thereby reduces their automatic impact [11,12]. Fusion, on the other hand is the tendency to assume that one’s thoughts accurately reflect reality, to the extent that they rigidly guide behavior [13,11,14].

Self-As-Context vs. Self-As-Content

Self-as-content is built from verbal rules and social evaluations, that shape self-esteem and the perception of self-worth based on positive or negative experiences [6,15,16]. This can limit coping and actions directed toward values. In contrast, self-as-context is when individuals observe their identity without clinging to past judgments or beliefs. This allows them to recognize the transitory nature of their experiences [17,15] and facilitates a flexible, present-centered perspective [1].

Contact with the Present Moment vs. Lack of Contact with the Present Moment

The tendency toward problem-solving leads the mind to focus on the past or the future, which creates a disconnect from the present [6]. Maintaining awareness of the present moment involves actively participating in daily experiences by paying attention without becoming trapped in memories or worries [11,15]. Constant distractions and the automation of everyday life hinder awareness of the here and now, which affects emotional regulation and decision-making [9,15].

Contact with Values vs. Lack of Contact with Values

In ACT, values are voluntarily chosen life directions, not rules, principles, or feelings. They represent personal choices oriented toward what is meaningful, independent of external reinforcers [1]. They do not require justification or evaluation but involve direct contact with what truly matters to the individual [11]. Lack of contact with values involves difficulty identifying them and often confusing them with goals or decisions guided by social approval. Pursuing objectives without a connection to values generates dissatisfaction and reinforces a cycle of external seeking without personal meaning [6].

Committed Action vs. Inaction

Committed action means acting in alignment with what truly matters to the individual, regardless of external expectations. It is oriented toward well-being and the expansion of possibilities rather than the avoidance of psychological discomfort [6]. Conversely, inaction is related to behavioral rigidity and avoidance. It arises when fear of failure and rules imposed by others limit action, thereby reinforcing psychological distress and perpetuating passivity toward life [18,19].

1.2. Psychological Flexibility in Higher Education

The changes and transitions inherent to human development can sometimes cause disruptions in how individuals think, feel, and act. Entering higher education requires university students not only to develop cognitive skills to meet academic demands but also to activate the emotional and social skills necessary for them to respond effectively to the challenges and difficulties posed by university life [20]. Attention to the psychological well-being of university students has become increasingly crucial, given the multiple adjustments and concerns they face when entering higher education. Unlike previous decades, when universities primarily focused on academic and professional training, they have now evolved into spaces for comprehensive development, opening doors for reflection on socially relevant issues. While this shift represents a positive advancement in the development of students' critical thinking, it also exposes them to new emotional challenges that add to academic pressures, job uncertainty, and the impact of economic and health crises.

A study conducted in eight countries identified university students as a vulnerable population in terms of mental health [21]. The researchers found that one in three first-year students reported a history of psychological disorders, such as anxiety and depression.

Research in Latin America has confirmed this issue. In a study in Peru, 40.3% of students exhibited medium to high levels of experiential avoidance, with a higher incidence among those in the early stages of adulthood (18-25 years old) [22]. In Brazil, researchers found that 39.9% of students showed symptoms of anxiety, depression, and somatization [23], while a study involving nursing students showed that more than a third suffered from depressive disorders, anxiety, and somatoform symptoms [24]. In a study conducted in Chile, 29% of university students exhibited depression, 53.2% experienced anxiety, and 47.8% reported stress [25], all of which negatively impacted their well-being and academic performance.

Taken together, these studies reveal that symptomatology associated with psychological disorders is experienced by students in response to the demands of the university environment [26]. Concern about potential failure as well as self-perceptions of being incapable of managing these demands may facilitate the emergence or persistence of control strategies aimed at avoiding exposure to stimuli with aversive meanings or engagement in a relentless search for explanations to understand the perceived distress. When distress is interpreted through such strategies, patterns of psychological inflexibility are activated. These may promote a perpetual and futile struggle to escape suffering, which may prove to be deeply harmful and disabling in daily life [11].

These findings highlight the need to gather more evidence, and a greater understanding of how personal psychological resources can either facilitate or hinder adaptation to the changes and challenges of university life. Quantitative studies have been conducted to explore the relationship between psychological flexibility, coping strategies, and emotional regulation, and their impact on academic performance [27,28]. However, few qualitative studies have deeply examined how psychological flexibility and inflexibility manifest in university students, particularly in terms of the meanings attributed to mental content in relation to their behavior.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was designed based on the principles associated with the qualitative research approach known as interpretative phenomenological analysis, which is framed within the context of thematic analysis [29]. Its philosophical roots stem from phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and hermeneutics [30,31]. The main objective of interpretative phenomenological analysis is to describe and understand people's experiences of a specific area of interest by allowing them to freely recall and express their experiences and to provide detailed descriptions of their lived experiences as they encountered them [32]. The most important aspect of this approach is to make sense of people's lived experiences and to interpret the meaning of a phenomenon or concept shared among several individuals [33].

2.1. Participants

We used purposive sampling to select a sample of 15 university students comprising eight women and seven men (age: $M = 20.13$ years, $SD = 1.30$) from different academic programs at the University of Magdalena in northern Colombia.

Eight of the participants lived in residences adapted to accommodate university students, while the remaining seven lived in family homes, either with their parents or with other extended family members. One student was officially recognized by the Colombian government as displaced due to violence stemming from armed conflict. None of the participants reported having any other special conditions or disabilities.

Thirteen participants reported being single, while two were in romantic relationships at the time of the study. Three of the participants were working while pursuing their professional education.

2.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

Individual interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes were conducted and recorded with the participants' informed consent. A script based on the processes of psychological flexibility and inflexibility [5] and the data collection principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis was used during the interviews. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and later transcribed for analysis.

The questions were neutral, open-ended, and flexible, which allowed the interviewer to explore emerging topics [32]. The questions addressed the six processes of the Hexaflex model used in ACT: acceptance, defusion, self-as-context, contact with the present moment, values, and committed action vs. inaction.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis consisted of four to six main stages depending on the number and duration of the interviews [32]. Table 1 describes the steps carried out for this study.

Table 1. Data analysis.

Steps	Level of complexity	Description
Transcription	Reading and cross-checking	Reviewing interviews and notes
Identification of initial themes	Identifying, highlighting, and differentiating	Highlighting recurring patterns and themes
Grouping of emerging themes	Connecting and categorizing	Grouping content into categories
Development of theme table	Organizing	Listing key themes
Data writing	Writing	Describing and illustrating emerging themes
Data analysis	Interpreting	Relating data to the overall content

Note. Adapted from "Introduction to Research Methods in Psychology" by D. Howitt and D. Cramer, 2011, Book Title, Pearson Education Limited, p. 391.

3. Results

It was important for the researchers to determine whether any of the participants had prior knowledge of the variable under analysis at the time of the interviews, as the intention was to obtain spontaneous and unbiased responses. In this regard, the aim of the first two interview questions was to determine whether the participants knew of or had ever heard of the concept of psychological flexibility and the behaviors associated with a psychologically flexible person. None of the participants were familiar with the concept, as they had never read about or heard of it before.

In terms of the behaviors and attitudes that should characterize a psychologically flexible person, a variety of responses were obtained. We identified similarities between the responses, which provided the attributes for grouping and labeling them. Categories were therefore established based on the participants' opinions. The categories open and reflective mindset, emotional management, and openness to change referred to behaviors directed toward oneself, while the social skills category was more oriented toward behaviors directed toward others.

Some responses from the open and reflective mindset category included:

It would be a very open-minded person, very spontaneous with ideas. I'm not saying they are entirely positive, but they don't see many obstacles; they always think about moving forward. (SP1 Male, 22 years old)

They are a person who doesn't cling to a single concept of things. I mean, even if things are stipulated to be a certain way, that person can change things and make them better. (SP6 Male, 22 years old)

In the emotional management category, the participants' responses included:

They wouldn't repress themselves; they would let themselves be carried by who they are, what they feel, [and] the emotions they have in the moment. (SP2 Male, 20 years old)

They are a person who has control over what they feel because they are capable of observing their surroundings. (SP9 Female, 21 years old)

The openness to change category emerged from responses such as:

[They are] able to face different situations, I don't know how to explain it, but they would help themselves move forward. (SP3 Female, 20 years old)

[They are] able to solve problems, [get] through them successfully. At first, I perceived it as a weakness, but I believe it's more about having the ability to solve [problems]. (SP14 Male, 18 years old)

The focus of the social skills category was attributes oriented toward others, for example:

They must be ... understanding ... toward others; they must be sociable. (SP11 Female, 19 years old)

They must be a tolerant, respectful person and, above all, someone who has the ability to truly listen, not just hear, but [to] listen and understand what the other person is expressing. (SP13 Female, 21 years old)

The analysis of the interviews led to the identification of 25 emerging themes, which were grouped into 12 superordinate themes that corresponded to the six processes of psychological flexibility and inflexibility proposed in the Hexaflex model in ACT.

The results that follow are presented according to the superordinate themes:

1. Manifestations Associated with the Control of Private Events

The experience of private events among the interviewed university students was characterized by a tendency to control the thoughts, emotions, and sensations they perceived as aversive. This manifested through deliberate strategies—either by clinging to mental content or by avoiding and invalidating such experiences.

One of the most common manifestations was rumination, in which the students focused on distressing thoughts or emotions, constantly reviewed them, and acknowledged their difficulty in detaching from them. Some of their statements reflected this recurrence:

I think about it daily, and daily means out of 24 hours a day, about 15 or 16 hours at a minimum. I really think about it very often. (SP1 Male, 22 years old)

Everything I think about revolves around that, then the thoughts come that I'm useless, I mean, I start thinking about all the bad things. (PS2 Male, 20 years old)

So, if something bad happens to me, I start thinking about it, and I can't concentrate on anything else. I mean, all my thoughts revolve around that. It's like I have to resolve that situation to be able to continue with my day. (SP12 Male, 22 years old)

One approach that the students resorted to when facing negative thoughts and uncomfortable emotions was to search for reasons to explain why the emotional experience was happening:

When something happens to me, I spend a lot of time thinking about it, and all the time in my head it's like why, why, why? I try to find an explanation or justification for what's happening to me. (SP3 Female, 20 years old)

I always try to find an explanation for the things that happen to me; I don't like to be left with doubts or with the questions that I impose on myself. (SP7 Male, 19 years old)

For other participants, invalidating what was happening to them or what they were feeling was a strategy they identified with. The most explicit form of this strategy was redirecting their attention to other activities, such as listening to music, exercising, or dancing. The repertoire was quite broad:

So I channel my anger into training, lifting a lot of weight, like all my anger, all my rage, that strength, and being mentally exhausted. (SP1 Male, 22 years old)

I mainly tend to invalidate everything—any situation that generates anger or disappointment in me, I just try not to think about it for as long as possible. (SP4 Female, 19 years old)

The invalidation of private events also manifested through behavior patterns related to avoidance, fleeing from exposure, and confrontation. Distancing and withdrawing from people was therefore a valuable resource that kept the students safe. A group of participants explained what this experience was like:

I change my attitude; if I'm angry or sad, I distance myself, I shut down and don't talk about it. So I carry that discomfort with me because I feel that if I am angry, I could offend or hurt someone. (SP3 Female, 20 years old)

I distance myself. I withdraw from everything and listen to music. I don't have many friends to lean on, so it's just me ... and I cry a lot. (SP7 Male, 19 years old)

I isolate myself; I prefer to be alone. (SP8 Female, 21 years old)

With regard to the control mechanisms oriented toward avoidance, none of the participants reported engaging in addictive behaviors, such as gambling or the use of drugs or alcohol.

2. Manifestations Associated with the Acceptance of Private Events

Overall, the interviewed students did not report strategies aimed at accepting and validating their internal worlds or voluntarily receiving their thoughts and emotions without opposition, although one participant recognized that the act of acceptance involves letting go of what hinders progress:

If I see that I can't solve it, then I say, why stress about it if I can't fix it anyway? So I let it go, release it, and move on. Honestly, one feels lighter. (SP6 Male, 22 years old)

3. Manifestations Associated with Observing Oneself Through the Content of Thoughts

The tendency to observe, define, and behave according to what one thinks and believes about oneself was evident among all the interviewed university students. We identified three specific forms of these manifestations. When discussing aspects related to observing or defining themselves, some of the participants expressed self-criticism based on the way they thought or felt. For example:

I know I have anger issues that I can control. I try not to get angry, instead I try to ignore those times when many bad things or family problems occur. I try not to get involved because I feel I have a lot of anger issues. (SP1 Male, 22 years old)

I feel that my way of being sometimes gives the impression that I want to be liked by everyone, and I've received comments like "You want to please everyone." I don't know how I do that or if I do it unconsciously, but I tend to be that way, and then I feel bad because I don't like that [other people] think that. (SP3 Female, 20 years old)

Another group of students attributed negative meanings to themselves based on their emotions or thoughts, as illustrated by these participants:

Being a perfectionist really bothers me; that part of me causes a lot of stress because not everything can be perfect. (SP11 Female, 19 years old)

Many times, I stop doing things because I know I won't feel good or because I believe I won't do them well, that they won't turn out right. (SP14 Male, 18 years old)

A common characteristic of many of the participants was to confuse what they thought with who they were, which was evidenced by defining the self based on thought content:

I'm a very insecure person; I don't like taking many risks. I always try to stay in a safe place. (SP4 Female, 19 years old)

I'm a bit manipulative, not in a bad way, but to achieve my goals. I'm always thinking about what benefits me and what doesn't. (SP7 Male, 19 years old)

4. Manifestations Associated with Observing Oneself Without Judgment

The ability to maintain perspective beyond negative emotions or thoughts and to sustain a balanced view of oneself regardless of the situation or its timing was a resource employed by a small number of the participants. Nevertheless, at least three of them acknowledged aspects associated with what they considered to be their essence—attributes that were invariable over time:

Before, I felt like a fearful person, somewhat insufficient [and] incompetent, [but] now I feel like a person with many positive qualities. I'm still afraid of many things—that hasn't changed—I'm still insecure, but now I move forward even with fear. (SP2 Male, 20 years old)

I am a sensitive person; that's my essence, and I feel like I will never lose it. But perhaps before, I was the kind of sensitive person who allowed everything because I loved others. (SP13 Female, 21 years old)

When you're a teenager, you see yourself one way, but when I entered university, I still thought the same things about myself, but my way of seeing myself to take risks and make decisions has changed a lot. (SP14 Male, 18 years old)

5. Manifestations Associated with Disconnection from the Present Moment

Strategies for controlling internal experiences employed by most of the students who participated in this study included being immersed in daily routines and constantly responding to everyday tasks without pause. This process encompassed a range of behaviors associated with avoiding or withdrawing not only from painful thoughts or emotions but also from the experience of living and interacting with others.

We therefore asked the participants: *"Can you explain to me what it's like to live on autopilot?"* They all describe it as doing the same thing every day without much enjoyment. One participant described it as an itinerary that is followed day after day:

Before going to bed, I start thinking: Tomorrow you have to get up at such and such a time, make breakfast at such and such a time, go to classes, then go to the gym, and when you get back from the gym, you have to do this and that, and so on every day. (SP7 Male, 19 years old)

A significant proportion of the participants acknowledged the functionality of being focused on daily tasks and commitments, as this kept them away from private experiences, as evidenced by the following:

I have so many things to do that I have no time for anything else, and it works for me because living like this helps me not think and not give myself space to feel bad. (SP10 Female, 19 years old)

What has worked for me to avoid feeling bad is doing lots of things. So, besides my academic workload, I'm also taking two more courses, and I really just get home exhausted and go to sleep. (SP7 Male, 19 years old)

A group of students were aware that they had been living this way for quite some time; however, at the time of the interview, they had not taken any action to break out of the routine or monotony. For example, one student said:

Because I'm even aware of it, but I don't do anything to change it. It's like I'm comfortable living this way, without anything out of the ordinary happening. (SP11 Female, 19 years old)

In contrast, another group of students became aware during the interview itself that they were living this way:

Right now, I'm realizing that I have been living like this. Until now, I hadn't stopped to think about it; I saw it as normal, like everyone lives this way. (SP3 Female, 20 years old)

Just now I'm becoming aware of it; I hadn't thought of it like this before. Until this moment, I saw it as part of my organization and wasn't aware of how rigid it can sound or seem. (SP7 Male, 19 years old)

6. Manifestations Associated with the Connection of the Present Moment

Being in contact with their current circumstances and enjoying what daily life offered occurred infrequently among the participants:

I have a routine, but I don't get lost in it; I mean, I enjoy my day. (SP6 Male, 22 years old)

I haven't fallen into that state of doing things mechanically. I get up at 5, go to university, have lunch, go back to university, and then return home, but I am aware of my routine and try to do other things I enjoy. (SP14 Male, 18 years old)

One participant explained what it meant to her to be in contact with the present moment:

I have always felt that I pay a lot of attention to the things I do and that I enjoy them. I can be very busy, but even so, if something comes up and I can make time for it, I do—like going to chat with friends or getting some ice cream. (SP15 Female, 19 years old)

7. Manifestations Associated with Fusing with Thought Content

Cognitive fusion is the inability to differentiate thought content from the sense of self, to place what is happening in perspective, and to distance oneself from one's mental content without being influenced by or hooked into emotions, memories, beliefs, or ideas.

The participants' narratives in response to the question *"Has it ever happened that you created a movie in your head that only existed there?"* revealed a tendency to fuse with their beliefs and thoughts, to become entangled with their distressing thoughts or feelings by applying various control mechanisms, which granted them the status of truth and considerably interfered with their circumstances and relationships with their environment. Examples of this were reported by these participants:

I have only had one relationship, and there was a time when I would make up movies in my head, thinking he was seeing someone else: They would leave at the same time, so they must be together. I spent all my time thinking about that. I got obsessed. I was always angry because I assumed something was happening, and eventually, my relationship ended because of that. (SP7 Male, 19 years old)

I have a kind of multiverse of what could happen; I always see all the things that could happen, especially the worse-case scenarios, and I act accordingly. (SP9 Female, 21 years old)

Another illustration of the interference caused by cognitive fusion interacting with context was noted by these participants:

When I confront people, I'm often surprised because I take what I think as a given and feel entitled to confront them, and sometimes I go too far with what I say. (SP12 Male, 22 years old)

For example, sometimes I meet someone and feel like they judge me badly, so I avoid interacting with that person because of how they looked at me. (SP14 Male, 18 years old)

Regarding the possibility of being a spectator of their private events, most of the participants emphasized the difficulty of putting things into perspective and distancing themselves from their mental content. This was reflected in their responses to the question *"Have you ever felt like a spectator of that movie?"*

No, I was the writer, director, producer, and protagonist but never the spectator. (SP7 Male, 19 years old)

No, during all that time I was completely immersed in the movie; that was my reality, and I didn't allow myself to see any other reality. (SP8 Female, 21 years old)

Another form of interference that disrupted the participants' behavior was the tendency to fuse with past emotions that were negative, as expressed by these students:

I haven't had a romantic relationship in a long time. But I feel like I can't feel anything for anyone. Since my uncle died, I haven't been able to feel anything for anyone. (SP1 Male, 22 years old)

I carry that feeling of being watched, like it was throughout high school. Of not being able to do things because I know my parents wouldn't like it, and in the end, I always end up feeling that way and prefer to do nothing. (SP4 Female, 19 years old)

8. Manifestations Associated with Separating from Thought Content

The ability to differentiate oneself from one's private experiences was recognized by a participant, who noted that:

I don't like to speculate because humans speculate for the worst, never for the best. And that leads to distress, misunderstandings, and problems. (SP13 Female, 21 years old)

This same participant explained what it felt like to be a spectator of her life:

At some point, I also learned to be a spectator, especially when I realized that [a] situation was beyond my control. So, I just let it unfold however it needed to because you can't control everything; it's exhausting, and I won't do anything to change it.

One participant described it in terms of the need to distance oneself from thoughts to stop suffering:

Sometimes you have to because if you can't solve things, why live miserably? That way, you put an end to the mortification. (SP6 Male, 22 years old)

When asked *"And when you see yourself as a spectator, what do you feel, what happens to you?"* both participants noted how it freed them of the burden of carrying mental content:

Calm, because I feel like I have let go, like I have taken a weight off my shoulders. It's better to just let things happen. (SP6 Male, 22 years old)

It's about accepting that you don't have control over everything. It's like taking a weight off your shoulders. It's like saying, everything passes, and this will pass too, and everything will fall into place. (SP13 Female, 21 years old)

9. Manifestations Associated with Interference in Contacting Personal Values

For some of the participants, it was difficult to connect with what was truly important to them. Although they demonstrated the ability to identify and list what gave meaning to their lives, they encountered obstacles in paying attention to their values.

When asked *"What things are important to you?"*, all the participants responded immediately, without taking time to think, which demonstrated clarity about what gave their lives meaning and purpose. Their answers made it clear that the participants assigned value to family, well-being, health, relationships, professional development, and autonomy.

Some responses regarding family were as follows:

The most important thing in my life is my grandmother. Obviously my parents too, but my grandmother and the two girls my uncle left behind are my greatest drive, one hundred percent. (SP1 Male, 22 years old)

My family. I think everything revolves around them. Because all my projects and everything I've planned are aimed at ensuring their stability. (SP5 Male, 20 years old)

Well-being as a valuable direction was recognized by some of the participants:

My well-being—that's the most important thing for me. (SP12 Male, 22 years old)

Currently, it's mainly my peace of mind, being able to improve my relationship with my parents, having a healthy relationship with them. (SP4 Female, 19 years old)

Regarding health, one participant noted:

My psychological and physical health; without health, there's nothing. (SP3 Female, 20 years old)

Others pointed to relationships as important aspects of their lives:

My family and my friends. (SP10 Female, 19 years old)

My family, my friends, and my boyfriend. (SP13 Female, 21 years old)

Professional development and achieving autonomy were also emphasized:

Finishing my degree, that's the most important thing. (SP6 Male, 22 years old)

My autonomy and my space are the most important things; [they are] the only things that depend on me. (SP9 Female, 21 years old)

Regarding interferences that prevented the participants from focusing on what they truly desired, several actions were identified; these were aimed at satisfying external expectations or following persuasion by others. For example:

The things I do, I do them so that my mom feels proud of me. She doesn't know that I'm homosexual and that makes many things difficult. But I want her to feel proud of me in other aspects,

to see me as someone successful and to realize that my condition has nothing to do with what I can achieve. (SP7 Male, 19 years old)

A significant number of the participants recognized that they struggled to keep their values in mind day-to-day, despite having identified them. When asked *"Have you ever forgotten about your values?"*, nine of the 15 participants responded in the affirmative and explained what happened when they lost sight of them:

I ended up really bad because I let my anger out. (SP1 Male, 22 years old)

Everything builds up, and I feel like sometimes I can't handle it. (SP12 Male, 22 years old)

Others described this situation as:

I lose my direction. (SP2 Male, 20 years old)

Everything becomes chaotic. (SP5 Male, 20 years old)

Everything gets out of control. (SP8 Female, 21 years old)

I don't make progress. (SP10 Female, 19 years old)

Another type of interference that distanced the participants from their values included expressions of apathy, as reflected in a response to the question *"How would you like to be remembered?"*

I wouldn't like to be remembered. Everyone is free; I don't do things to be admired or followed. I do things as I see fit. It sounds selfish, but I honestly don't care because others are also responsible for themselves. Everyone has their own way of thinking and acting. (SP9 Female, 21 years old)

With regard to the questions *"How do you see yourself in the future?"* and *"What things would you like to achieve?"*, their responses were often linked to fear of failure or uncertainty. For example:

It's not something like "I want this or that in the future." I don't want to idealize my future because I don't want to look back and realize I didn't achieve what I wanted; that would affect me.

10. Manifestations Associated with Contacting Personal Values

Contacting personal values is an action that the study participants allowed themselves to carry out; most of them showed a willingness to explore what they wanted to be and achieve. This was clear in their responses to the question *"How would you like to be remembered?"*

As the person who overcame himself, because my past was very dark. I was on the verge of collapse; I even distanced myself from my friends so they wouldn't feel pain if something happened to me. (Male, 22 years old)

As a joyful, centered person who does everything with good intentions. I would like to be remembered as someone funny, capable of enjoying life. (Male, 19 years old)

The same trend was observed in response to the question *"How do you see yourself in the future?"*

Being the same cheerful and fun person, with many achieved goals, a good job, new friends, and people who surround me and bring good things into my life... Making my family happy. (SP2 Male, 20 years old)

Having overcome all these obstacles that stop and paralyze me, that don't let me move forward. (SP11 Female, 19 years old)

Likewise, the participants stated that they kept what was important to them present in their daily lives. Some of them commented:

Every time I wake up, I try to remember what I want to achieve and that everything I have done so far has been for that. (SP6 Male, 22 years old)

I feel that we are a reflection of what we live. Many people tell me that I am loving because I grew up in a home like that; my dad is so loving with my mom, he respects her, loves her, is present, and is so responsible that I reflect that. So, I always keep that in mind in my life. (SP13 Female, 21 years old)

11. Manifestations Associated with Behavioral Rigidity

Behavioral rigidity ranges from ineffective strategies to difficulty acting according to what individuals consider important. The participants who identified their values mobilized resources to achieve them but struggled to determine whether their actions were consistent with those values. When asked how they reached their goals, they focused their responses on concrete plans and steps rather than on their stated values. For example:

I'm disciplined, so when I have clear goals, I give everything I have to achieve them—my effort, my time. I fully commit to it and, no matter what happens, I do it. I achieve it. (SP2 Male, 20 years old)

Well, first I organize my time so that the things I want to achieve can be done on time. Also, I surround myself with people who can help me achieve what I want. (SP6 Male, 22 years old)

Some of the participants, although they had identified their values, had difficulty acting in accordance with them and attributed this to thoughts of failure and the emotional distress they may experience:

I would love to travel, explore, put down roots somewhere else, but I worry that my grandmother might die, and I won't be there. (SP1 Male, 22 years old)

I do everything short term. Long-term plans, like for a year from now, don't work for me. I only act when I'm certain that I'll get results. (SP9 Female, 21 years old)

Other participants faced difficulties carrying out the actions necessary to fulfill their desires because of the obstacles they encountered, as shown in these examples:

Well, it depends on the obstacle. If it depends on someone else, I'll probably just set it aside and move on to something else. I have the ability to let go of things without [them] affecting me in the future. (SP9 Female, 21 years old)

It's really hard for me—honestly, when something doesn't go as I expected, thoughts of incompetence overwhelm me. That holds me back and stops me from continuing on the path I had already mapped out. (SP11 Female, 19 years old)

4. Discussion

In this study, we aimed to explore manifestations of psychological flexibility and inflexibility among university students by using semi-structured interviews. The most relevant finding was the participants' tendency to control private events with aversive meanings and their difficulty in acting in alignment with their personal values. In the following sections, we discuss these results in relation to the existing literature.

- Experiential Avoidance vs. Acceptance

Our study revealed that the participants used control mechanisms to regulate their private events and perceived psychological distress negatively. Cognitive fusion with mental content, the search for justifications, and avoidance of aversive internal experiences predominated.

Wilson and Luciano described this as a vicious circle where attempts to control suffering result in increased distress [1]. The participants associated this struggle with exhaustion and frustration, which reflected the influence of their social and cultural contexts on their perceptions of suffering. The belief that pain must be avoided at all costs was reinforced, while well-being was mistakenly equated with happiness [1]. However, the participants did not mention the use of alcohol or drugs or other addictive behaviors as avoidance strategies. These behaviors, which alter internal events that generate distress, can lead to experiential avoidance disorder [2]. Our finding suggests that, for this group of students, substance use did not play a significant role in their emotional and cognitive regulation.

- Self-As-Content vs. Self-As-Context

The participants tended to link their respective identities with self-criticism and the belief that their emotions and thoughts were inappropriate. They confused the socially constructed self with their continuous and timeless self, which hindered their ability to detach from the environment and attend to who they truly were. This attachment to verbal rules led them to strive for social conformity, which resulted in harsh and unrealistic self-evaluations [14].

Many of the participants associated their identity with external expectations, the need for parental approval, and the urgency to prove their worth to others, which limited their ability to act in alignment with their own values [1,6,15]. This self-criticism arises from internalized social norms about what is considered "right."

Another pattern observed was confusion between who they were and who they believed themselves to be based on past experiences. In this way, they constructed their self-definitions based on specific behaviors and events, thereby reinforcing the behavioral patterns that justified their self-perceptions.

- Lack of Contact with the Present Moment vs. Contact with the Present Moment

Modern life promotes the idea that well-being and success depend on productivity. Being constantly busy was a recurring pattern among the study participants—some were aware of it, while others were not. They lived on autopilot; they followed schedules and routines without paying attention to their thoughts or emotions and used distraction as an avoidance mechanism in response to loneliness, frustration, and psychological distress [15]. For them, this state seemed to serve an adaptive function by providing a false sense of progress, as they confused productivity with well-being while postponing connection with their inner world. Making endless to-do lists and feeling like there is never enough time reinforces the cultural belief that being idle is negative [9].

However, two of the participants expressed an awareness of their routines and attempted to balance them with meaningful activities. They prioritized moments of personal connection and enjoyment outside of their daily obligations, which allowed themselves to experience life more fully [11,15].

- Fusion vs. Defusion

The need to make sense of psychological distress drives individuals to organize their thoughts logically, thereby leading to a fusion between verbal/cognitive processing and direct experience, which makes differentiation difficult [11]. Among the study participants, this tendency manifested in three ways: The students became entangled in distressing thoughts or emotions, struggled to gain perspective, or allowed past experiences to interfere with the present. Although these strategies were intended to create coherence, the students ended up rigidly regulating their behavior without taking additional information into account [11].

In this regard, Blackledge [13] argued that people believe in their thoughts so strongly that they take them as reality itself, which affects their behavior and interpersonal relationships and reinforces inflexible behavioral patterns.

Defusion requires training and a willingness to change one's relationship with one's thoughts rather than eliminating them [11]. Some of the participants recognized fusion as exhausting and draining, as it involves trying to control the uncontrollable. As Blackledge [13] pointed out, thoughts can become problematic when one cannot determine when to consider them and when to let them go.

- Lack of Contact with Values vs. Contact with Values

The study participants were able to identify areas that gave meaning to their lives. Family was most frequently mentioned, and it was associated with notions such as totality (*"my family is everything to me"*), motivation (*"she is my driving force"*), reward (*"I want to give that achievement to my parents"*), hierarchy (*"family should always come first"*), and support (*"my mom is unconditional"*). They also emphasized education as a means to achieve goals, mental health, friendship, and a sense of self linked to peace and autonomy. Only one participant mentioned romantic relationships.

Although the participants appeared to have clarity about their values, we identified interferences to their genuine connections. One such interference was the tendency to satisfy external expectations. In this regard, Hayes [6] warned that confusing immediate gratification with life meaning leads to actions motivated by fear of disapproval and a disregard for personal motivations that bring well-being.

Another manifestation of a lack of connection with values was indifference toward life's purpose. Wilson and Luciano [1] explained that such responses act as protective mechanisms against fear of failure or rejection.

In ACT, values are the ongoing choices that guide life and are unlike goals, which are finite [1]. Keeping values present helps prevent social control and avoid discomfort taking over [11]. When the study participants lost sight of their values, they described their experiences using terms like loss,

lack of control, and directionlessness: *"I lose my way," "everything gets out of control,"* and *"I'm not making progress."*

- Inaction vs. Committed Action

Inaction or behavioral rigidity sustains people's psychological distress, as they avoid situations that might lead to failure [18]. In this way, psychological inflexibility prevents individuals from acting in accordance with their personal values. Among the study participants, the main manifestation of this rigidity was difficulty in recognizing when their actions did not align with their values. Instead of acting based on principles, such as family, well-being, or education, their decisions tended to be focused on concrete goals. This aligns with Hayes [11] suggestion that fusion with negative thoughts limits one's ability to consider alternative options and to act in accordance with one's values.

Another significant manifestation was the lack of commitment to action due to fear of failure or uncertainty. Behavioral rigidity causes people to act according to imposed rules rather than their desires. Negative self-evaluations and the need to meet others' expectations generate a cycle of avoidance, which hinders the development of a full and meaningful life [11]. In many cases, emotional avoidance functions as a defense mechanism against painful experiences. The need for control translates into the suppression of thoughts and emotions that generate discomfort, which paradoxically reinforces suffering.

In the context of well-being and interpersonal relationships, emotional avoidance creates barriers that limit connections with personal values. The tendency to avoid difficult situations instead of facing them strengthens disconnection from what truly matters. This pattern reflects the idea that fusion and avoidance can obstruct value-based commitment [11].

Committing to action guided by values is a challenging process that requires one to overcome behavioral rigidity. Psychological flexibility involves making decisions aligned with one's values, even when they bring discomfort or uncertainty. Hayes [6] emphasized that acting according to one's own values—rather than external expectations—facilitates the construction of a more authentic and meaningful life.

Choosing to live in alignment with one's values requires self-knowledge and confronting one's personal reality; shedding self-imposed barriers opens the door to a fuller life. This process may be painful, but it is essential to overcoming fusion with the conceptualized self and reconnecting with what truly matters [6].

5. Conclusions

In terms of mental health, university students have been identified as a vulnerable population [26]. Within the educational context, a negative self-perception can significantly affect academic performance by causing psychological distress and making it difficult for students to carry out the academic and social activities inherent to university life.

Promoting psychological flexibility—which is understood to be the ability to experience negative thoughts and emotions without avoiding or challenging them while engaging in actions aligned with one's personal values [6]—helps students accept and adapt more effectively to changes, adjust to new demands, and face obstacles. In contrast, psychological inflexibility, which is characterized by avoidance or control of aversive internal experiences, contributes to the persistence of ineffective strategies that intensify emotional distress and hinder decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and the achievement of academic goals [19].

The manifestations of psychological inflexibility among the students in this study were primarily evident in fusion with mental content. Nine of the 15 interviewees related that, when experiencing psychological discomfort—whether due to thoughts or emotions—they tended to become entangled with them while searching for solutions to the perceived discomfort or through self-reflective dialogue about the origin of their suffering. Wilson and Luciano [1] explained that attempts to regulate or control negative private experiences can become a vicious circle that, rather than resolving suffering, intensifies it. Control mechanisms related to avoidance or escape from perceived distress were present in the remaining six participants in this study. Five of them described difficulties in

their family environments, such as issues of recognition, self-worth, and emotional abandonment by one parent; excessive demands, expectations, and restrictive parenting; complex family separations that had caused conflict; and either physical abandonment by the father or emotional abandonment by the mother. These negative experiences had become integrated into the conceptualized self and were guiding their behavior in their pursuit of approval and recognition as strong, competent, and worthy. As a result, their actions were oriented toward meeting external expectations, particularly from family, which limited their ability to act in a way that satisfied them and in accordance with their personal values [1,6,15].

All the study participants attributed meanings to the conceptualized self based on their family experiences or verbal rules, which when taken as substitutes for reality, shaped their relationships with themselves and others [13]. Their self-definitions were based on external descriptions and evaluations, which when interpreted literally, led to self-criticism. This hindered their ability to distinguish these evaluations from more intimate and compassionate views of the self. Consequently, their decisions and behaviors were influenced by rigid, socially constructed thoughts and beliefs [14].

Despite not having difficulties expressing their values, the university students in our study showed inconsistencies in their behavior toward their values. This suggested a need for them to clarify their relationship with the fused content of the self. In other words, the lack of commitment to their values or their inaction seemed more related to a need to maintain a rigid self-image than to a willingness to accept their private experiences and to make free and conscious decisions based on what they truly valued. Differentiating what is genuinely valued from what is perceived as important according to external norms can open up opportunities to act consistently with one's well-being rather than chasing the illusion of a life without pain or suffering. As Hayes [6] noted, confusing immediate gratification with life's meaning can lead to decisions driven by fear of disapproval, in which personal motivations that truly promote well-being are sidelined.

This study offers valuable insights into the manifestations of psychological flexibility and inflexibility among a group of university students from northern Colombia, as well as the functional meanings they attributed to those manifestations. The findings offer a deeper understanding of how students' control, regulation, and avoidance mechanisms are shaped by arbitrary social interactions configured through language. In this sense, our study contributes to a deeper comprehension of how a group of students at a public university relate to their mental content and how that relationship influences their behaviors and interactions with others. Additionally, this study revealed the emotional and psychological needs experienced by the university students as they attempted to reconcile their personal histories with their academic demands.

Reflecting on these manifestations of psychological flexibility and inflexibility invites a reconsideration of how well-being and distress are conceptualized. We therefore deem it relevant to design and implement a program focused on promoting psychological flexibility and guiding students to face the challenges of university life in a way that aligns with their personal values—without becoming trapped in aversive past experiences or in the uncertainty and self-fulfilling prophecies of failure that the future may present. Psychological flexibility would foster a redefinition of students' private experiences as they navigate their academic and professional development and allow them to build their lives in alignment with their values and aspirations.

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Abbreviations

ACT Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

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