

Development and Evaluation of the Effectiveness of an Integrated Ego Educational Model Based on Object Relations Theory and Davanloo's Psychodynamic Approach

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of an integrated ego educational model based on object relations theory and Davanloo's psychodynamic approach among university students in Tehran. This study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the integrated ego educational model was developed through a survey-based developmental approach using theoretical literature, previous research, expert opinions, and the final factors derived from a researcher-made Integrated Ego Questionnaire. The final model consisted of seven dimensions: defense mechanisms and emotion regulation, mindfulness and motivation for change, resistance and non-attachment, ego differentiation and quality of object relations, adaptive capacity and ego strength, anxiety regulation, and ego functions. In the second phase, the effectiveness of the model was examined using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design with a control group. The sample included 30 university students in Tehran who were divided into an experimental group and a control group, with 15 participants in each group. The experimental group received the seven-session educational intervention, whereas the control group received no intervention. Data were analyzed using one-way analysis of covariance at a significance level of .05 while controlling for pretest scores. After controlling for pretest scores, the effect of group was statistically significant for defense mechanisms and emotion regulation, $F(1, 27) = 141.75, p < .001, \eta^2 = .84$; mindfulness and motivation for change, $F(1, 27) = 310.50, p < .001, \eta^2 = .92$; resistance and non-attachment, $F(1, 27) = 60.10, p < .001, \eta^2 = .69$; ego differentiation and quality of object relations, $F(1, 27) = 30.45, p < .001, \eta^2 = .53$; adaptive capacity and ego strength, $F(1, 27) = 35.79, p < .001, \eta^2 = .57$; anxiety regulation, $F(1, 27) = 34.36, p < .001, \eta^2 = .56$; and ego functions, $F(1, 27) = 30.45, p < .001, \eta^2 = .53$. The integrated ego educational model based on object relations theory and Davanloo's psychodynamic approach was effective in significantly improving all seven dimensions of integrated ego functioning and may be considered a useful brief psychoeducational intervention for strengthening ego-related capacities in university students.

Keywords: Integrated Ego; Object Relations; Davanloo; Psychodynamic Approach; Ego Strength; Emotion Regulation; University Students

1. Introduction

The ego occupies a central position in psychodynamic theory because it functions as the psychological system responsible for organizing internal experience, regulating affect, mediating between instinctual demands and external reality, maintaining coherent self-experience, and facilitating adaptive interpersonal functioning. From a contemporary psychodynamic perspective, healthy ego functioning cannot be reduced to a single capacity; rather, it encompasses a constellation of interrelated abilities, including reality testing, affect regulation, impulse control, self-observation, defensive functioning, anxiety tolerance, identity integration, interpersonal differentiation, and the capacity to form and maintain stable object relations. These capacities provide the psychological infrastructure through which individuals recognize internal states, tolerate emotional tension, respond flexibly to environmental demands, and establish meaningful relationships. When ego functioning is compromised, the individual may increasingly rely on rigid or maladaptive defenses, experience difficulties in regulating emotions and anxiety, and encounter instability in interpersonal relationships. Empirical findings have accordingly demonstrated meaningful differences in ego strength, defensive mechanisms, and object relations between individuals with depressive symptoms and psychologically healthy individuals, indicating that the quality of ego organization is closely associated with broader psychological adjustment and psychopathology (Bahmaninia & Sohrabi Shegefti, 2024).

The concept of an integrated ego is particularly important because effective psychological functioning depends not merely on the isolated presence of individual ego capacities but on their coordinated operation. An individual may possess adequate cognitive insight yet remain unable to regulate intense affect, or may demonstrate apparent interpersonal competence while relying on defensive avoidance when emotionally threatening material emerges. Integration therefore implies that self-observation, affect tolerance, defensive flexibility, differentiation, anxiety regulation, and reality-oriented functioning operate in a relatively coordinated manner. In this sense, ego strength represents the capacity to preserve psychological organization in the presence of internal conflict and external stress. Research among students has shown that ego strength plays a mediating and moderating role in the association between object relations and identity states, emphasizing that ego capacities are deeply involved in the organization of

selfhood and the transformation of relational experiences into coherent identity structures (Nikosafat & Qarebaghi, 2020). Similar evidence indicates that ego functions and object relations mediate the relationship between family functioning and students' mental health, suggesting that the effects of interpersonal environments on psychological well-being are partly transmitted through the internal organization of the ego (Shafagh Doust & Shahamat Deh Sorkh, 2019).

Object relations theory provides an especially relevant framework for understanding the development and functioning of the ego. According to this perspective, psychological development occurs through the internalization of early relational experiences and the formation of representations of the self, significant others, and the emotional exchanges that connect them. These internalized object relations subsequently influence affect regulation, attachment, self-concept, expectations of others, interpersonal boundaries, and responses to separation, intimacy, and conflict. When object relations are relatively integrated, individuals are better able to perceive both themselves and others as complex and stable persons, tolerate ambivalence, and maintain emotional connection without excessive fusion or withdrawal. In contrast, poorly integrated object relations may contribute to unstable self-representations, polarized perceptions of others, maladaptive defenses, and heightened interpersonal vulnerability. Among university students, object relations and early maladaptive schemas have been shown to be significantly related to borderline personality symptoms, supporting the relevance of internalized relational representations to personality organization and emotional instability (Chamani & Najafi, 2018). The importance of object relations also extends to major life decisions, as ego development and object-relational representations have been associated with the decision to migrate, indicating that internal psychological organization may influence the way individuals interpret separation, autonomy, attachment, and major environmental transitions (Hosseini et al., 2024).

The relationship between object relations and ego functioning is therefore reciprocal and developmentally interconnected. Internalized relational experiences contribute to the formation of ego capacities, while the strength and flexibility of the ego determine how individuals interpret, regulate, and revise those representations in later relationships. This interplay has been demonstrated in structural models in which ego strength is explained partly by object relations and personality organization (Oveisi et al., 2023). Likewise, research on marital commitment has

indicated that object relations may exert their effects through ego strength, suggesting that more mature relational representations are associated with greater psychological capacity to sustain commitment, regulate conflict, and maintain relational continuity (Rajabi et al., 2024). These findings support conceptualizations of the ego as an active organizational system through which relational experiences are transformed into adaptive or maladaptive patterns of emotional and interpersonal functioning.

Defense mechanisms represent another fundamental dimension of ego organization. From a psychodynamic perspective, defenses are not inherently pathological; they serve important regulatory functions by protecting the individual from overwhelming anxiety, internal conflict, and unacceptable impulses. However, psychological health depends substantially on the flexibility, maturity, and context-appropriateness of defensive operations. Excessive reliance on primitive or rigid defenses may distort reality, limit emotional awareness, and interfere with adaptive processing of interpersonal experience. Conversely, more mature and flexible defenses allow the individual to recognize difficult emotions while preserving psychological stability. Research on social anxiety has demonstrated meaningful associations between object relations and defense mechanisms, highlighting the joint contribution of relational representations and defensive processes to anxiety-related difficulties (Mesgarian et al., 2017). A structural model involving individuals with Cluster B personality disorders has further shown significant relationships among ego strength, defense styles, object relations, and cognitive emotion regulation, reinforcing the proposition that defensive functioning and emotion regulation are closely embedded within broader ego organization (Rastgoo et al., 2023).

Emotion regulation is particularly important within an integrated model of ego functioning because affective experiences provide both information and psychological pressure. The ability to identify, tolerate, differentiate, and modulate emotions without excessive suppression, impulsive discharge, or avoidance is central to adaptive functioning. Difficulties in emotion regulation often coexist with disturbances in object relations, self-reflection, and ego strength. Evidence from individuals with dependent personality disorder symptoms has shown that mentalization-based group therapy can improve object relations and reduce difficulties in emotion regulation, indicating that enhancing reflective awareness of mental states may also promote more adaptive management of

affective experiences (Maleki et al., 2025). In other populations, psychoeducational interventions have similarly produced improvements in cognitive emotion regulation, demonstrating that emotion-related capacities can be systematically targeted through structured educational programs rather than being regarded solely as fixed personality characteristics (Roghani et al., 2024).

Mindfulness and self-observation are closely related to this regulatory capacity. In psychodynamic terms, self-observation refers to the ego's ability to notice thoughts, feelings, bodily experiences, impulses, and defensive responses without becoming completely absorbed by them. Mindfulness may strengthen this observing position by facilitating present-moment awareness and reducing automatic reactivity to internal experiences. This capacity can increase motivation for change because psychological change first requires recognition of habitual patterns. In students, mentalization has been associated with attachment styles, ego strength, object relations, and patterns of anxiety manifestation, indicating that the ability to understand one's own and others' mental states is linked to the organization of both relational and ego processes (Shojaei & Dehghani, 2023). Thus, strengthening reflective awareness may provide an important bridge between insight and actual behavioral or emotional change.

Resistance constitutes another major psychodynamic construct relevant to ego integration. Resistance refers to processes through which an individual avoids emotionally significant material, threatening insight, painful affect, or psychological change. Resistance may manifest through intellectualization, detachment, avoidance, minimization, passivity, excessive compliance, or interpersonal distancing. Within Davanloo's intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy, resistance is approached actively and systematically in order to facilitate direct access to underlying emotions while simultaneously monitoring anxiety and defensive responses. The objective is not simply to eliminate defenses but to help individuals distinguish defensive operations from genuine emotional experience and to develop sufficient ego capacity to tolerate previously avoided affect. The clinical relevance of this framework has been supported by studies indicating that intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy can improve alexithymia, defensive styles, and ego strength in individuals with irritable bowel syndrome (Jafari & Joharifard, 2023). Similarly, intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy has been associated with changes in self-differentiation and attachment-related behavior among women experiencing

difficulties in marital relationships, underscoring the potential of psychodynamic interventions to affect both intrapsychic and interpersonal dimensions of functioning (Kashefi et al., 2023).

Anxiety regulation is especially central to Davanloo's psychodynamic framework. Anxiety is conceptualized not merely as a symptom to be reduced but as a signal generated when emotionally significant material approaches conscious experience. The capacity of the ego to regulate anxiety determines whether a person can remain psychologically engaged with affect or instead resorts to avoidance, somatization, cognitive disruption, or defensive withdrawal. Therapeutic work therefore requires attention to the channels through which anxiety is manifested, including muscular tension, autonomic activation, bodily sensations, and cognitive-perceptual changes. Strengthening the individual's ability to recognize and tolerate anxiety can create the conditions for more direct emotional processing. Clinical evidence indicates that accelerated short-term psychodynamic therapy can significantly improve ego functions among patients with generalized anxiety disorder, supporting the proposition that interventions targeting unconscious conflict, defenses, and anxiety regulation may strengthen broader ego capacities rather than merely reducing symptomatic anxiety (Mortazavi et al., 2024).

Self-differentiation is another important component of an integrated ego. Differentiation involves maintaining a coherent sense of self while remaining emotionally connected to significant others. Individuals with higher differentiation can recognize their own feelings, needs, values, and boundaries without excessive dependence on approval or emotional distancing. Low differentiation, by contrast, may result in fusion, rigid boundaries, relational reactivity, or difficulties tolerating disagreement and separation. Because object relations are fundamentally concerned with representations of the self in relation to others, differentiation can be understood as an interpersonal expression of ego integration. Therapeutic approaches based on object relations have shown benefits for relationally relevant psychological capacities. For example, object relations therapy and relationship imagery therapy have been reported to improve sense of coherence and self-regulation among women with repeated divorce experiences, suggesting that interventions focused on internalized relationship patterns can contribute to greater psychological organization and regulation (Hazratzadeh et al., 2023).

The therapeutic value of object-relational approaches has also been demonstrated beyond explicitly relational

disorders. A short-term object relations group intervention was found to improve self-awareness, social anxiety, and alexithymia among patients with asthma, illustrating that modifying internal relational patterns may influence emotional awareness and broader psychosocial functioning (Sarlak & Talebi, 2025). Research on fibromyalgia further indicates that object relations may influence symptom experiences through psychological processes such as alexithymia and self-compassion, emphasizing the relevance of relational representations to the regulation and interpretation of both emotional and bodily experiences (Omidi Cheshmeh Kabood et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings suggest that object relations are not restricted to interpersonal functioning but are embedded in the individual's broader mechanisms of self-regulation, affective processing, and adaptation.

Despite these advances, much of the existing literature has examined ego strength, defense mechanisms, emotion regulation, object relations, differentiation, anxiety, and related psychological capacities either separately or within relatively narrow clinical frameworks. This fragmentation may limit the ability to understand how these components operate together as an integrated system. From an educational and preventive perspective, a multidimensional model may be particularly useful because many individuals, including university students, may not require disorder-specific psychotherapy but may nevertheless benefit from structured training that strengthens core ego capacities. Students encounter developmental demands involving autonomy, identity formation, intimate relationships, academic performance, occupational planning, and adaptation to changing social expectations. These challenges can activate underlying relational patterns, defenses, anxiety, and difficulties in emotion regulation. Strengthening integrated ego capacities during this developmental period may therefore have both preventive and developmental value.

There is also increasing evidence that interventions targeting one component of psychological organization can produce changes in related domains, supporting the development of integrative programs. Studies of ego strength, object relations, emotion regulation, and dynamic psychotherapy collectively suggest that these variables form an interconnected psychological network rather than independent constructs (Jafari & Joharifard, 2023; Maleki et al., 2025; Rastgoo et al., 2023). However, interventions that explicitly translate this network into a coherent educational protocol remain limited. A structured psychoeducational

model can potentially make psychodynamic concepts accessible through practical exercises involving emotional identification, bodily awareness, recognition of defenses, mindfulness, examination of interpersonal boundaries, anxiety tracking, self-care, reality testing, and behavioral experimentation. Such a model may also reduce the gap between theoretically sophisticated psychodynamic concepts and educational procedures that can be implemented systematically in nonclinical or student populations.

Another consideration is that ego development is not static. The capacity for reflection, adaptive defense, emotion regulation, differentiation, and relational integration can be strengthened through corrective emotional experiences, increased awareness, and repeated practice. Contemporary evidence supports the modifiability of several ego-related domains through different psychological interventions. Improvements in ego functions following psychodynamic treatment (Mortazavi et al., 2024), changes in ego strength and defense styles after intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy (Jafari & Joharifard, 2023), improvements in object relations and emotion regulation through mentalization-based treatment (Maleki et al., 2025), and enhanced self-awareness following object relations interventions (Sarlak & Talebi, 2025) all suggest that ego capacities can be developed rather than regarded as fixed traits. These findings provide a foundation for designing an intervention that targets multiple dimensions simultaneously.

At the same time, the educational model should be sensitive to the dynamic relationships among these dimensions. Defense mechanisms influence emotional access; anxiety affects the capacity to remain engaged with internal experience; mindfulness facilitates self-observation; object relations shape expectations in relationships; differentiation regulates boundaries; and ego strength supports adaptation under psychological pressure. For this reason, an integrated program should not merely present seven unrelated topics but should organize them as complementary capacities within a coherent developmental sequence. Such integration is consistent with evidence demonstrating interconnected relations among ego strength, object relations, personality organization, attachment, and mentalization (Oveisi et al., 2023; Shojaei & Dehghani, 2023). It is also compatible with findings showing that ego strength can mediate the relationship between relational processes and important psychosocial outcomes, including

identity and marital commitment (Nikosafat & Qarebaghi, 2020; Rajabi et al., 2024).

From a psychodynamic standpoint, the combination of object relations theory with Davanloo's approach offers a particularly useful conceptual synthesis. Object relations theory explains how internalized relational experiences contribute to the formation of self and interpersonal representations, whereas Davanloo's dynamic framework provides an active method for identifying resistance, observing defenses, monitoring anxiety, and facilitating direct contact with emotionally significant experience. Integrating these perspectives within a psychoeducational format allows the model to address both the developmental organization of the ego and the dynamic processes that maintain maladaptive functioning in the present. Such a framework is also consistent with research indicating that disturbances in ego strength, defensive organization, and object relations frequently coexist across diverse psychological conditions (Bahmaninia & Sohrabi Shegefti, 2024; Mesgarian et al., 2017) and that improvement in these domains may promote more adaptive emotional and interpersonal functioning.

Accordingly, the development of an integrated ego educational model requires both conceptual formulation and empirical evaluation. The model should identify core dimensions supported by theoretical and empirical evidence, transform those dimensions into structured and teachable content, and determine whether participation in the resulting program produces measurable improvements compared with the absence of intervention. In the present study, seven dimensions—defense mechanisms and emotion regulation, mindfulness and motivation for change, resistance and non-attachment, ego differentiation and quality of object relations, adaptive capacity and ego strength, anxiety regulation, and ego functions—were conceptualized as interconnected components of integrated ego functioning. These dimensions reflect both relational and intrapsychic processes and provide a multidimensional framework for enhancing psychological organization. The aim of the present study was to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of an integrated ego educational model based on object relations theory and Davanloo's psychodynamic approach among university students in Tehran.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was conducted in two consecutive phases, comprising a model-development phase and an effectiveness-evaluation phase. In the first phase, a survey-based developmental approach was employed to formulate an educational model of the integrated ego based on object relations theory and Davanloo's psychodynamic approach. The model was developed through a systematic examination of the relevant theoretical foundations, previous empirical studies, expert opinions, and the final factors extracted from the researcher-made Integrated Ego Questionnaire. The findings obtained from these sources were integrated to identify the principal dimensions of the integrated ego and to translate these dimensions into a structured educational model. Seven final factors were identified as the conceptual foundations of the intervention: defense mechanisms and emotion regulation, mindfulness and motivation for change, resistance and non-attachment, ego differentiation and quality of object relations, adaptive capacity and ego strength, anxiety regulation, and ego functions. In the second phase, the effectiveness of the developed educational model was evaluated using a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design with an experimental group and a control group. The statistical population consisted of university students studying at universities in Tehran, Iran. A total of 30 students were included in the study and assigned to two groups of 15 participants each, comprising an experimental group and a control group. The total sample consisted of 16 men (53.3%) and 14 women (46.7%). Regarding age, 5 participants (16.7%) were between 21 and 30 years of age, 15 participants (50.0%) were between 31 and 40 years of age, and 10 participants (33.3%) were between 41 and 50 years of age. Before the intervention, both groups completed the pretest assessment. The experimental group subsequently participated in seven educational sessions based on the developed integrated ego model, whereas the control group received no intervention during the corresponding period. Following completion of the seven-session program, both groups completed the posttest assessment under comparable conditions. This design made it possible to examine changes attributable to participation in the integrated ego educational program while statistically controlling for participants' baseline scores.

2.2. Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using the researcher-made Integrated Ego Questionnaire developed in the first phase of the study. The questionnaire was constructed on the basis of an examination of the theoretical literature related to ego psychology, object relations theory, psychodynamic concepts derived from Davanloo's approach, previous research findings, and expert evaluations. The instrument was designed to provide a multidimensional assessment of integrated ego functioning rather than limiting the construct to a single psychological capacity. Following the development and evaluation process, seven final factors were retained and used as the principal dimensions of both the measurement instrument and the educational model. These dimensions consisted of defense mechanisms and emotion regulation, which reflected the individual's capacity to recognize defensive processes and regulate affective responses; mindfulness and motivation for change, which represented awareness of ongoing internal experiences and psychological readiness to modify maladaptive patterns; resistance and non-attachment, which addressed defensive avoidance and the ability to remain in contact with emotionally meaningful experiences without excessive defensive withdrawal; ego differentiation and quality of object relations, which concerned interpersonal boundaries, differentiation of self from significant others, and the quality of internalized and actual relational patterns; adaptive capacity and ego strength, which reflected the ability of the ego to maintain effective functioning under internal and external pressure; anxiety regulation, which represented the capacity to recognize, tolerate, and regulate manifestations of anxiety; and ego functions, which encompassed capacities such as self-observation, reality testing, emotional containment, and adaptive engagement with reality. The final factor structure of this researcher-made instrument also served as the conceptual framework for designing the seven-session educational intervention. The questionnaire was administered to participants at the pretest and posttest stages so that changes in integrated ego functioning following the intervention could be evaluated.

2.3. Intervention Protocol

The integrated ego educational model was implemented for the experimental group in seven sessions, with each session corresponding primarily to one of the seven final dimensions identified during the model-development phase. Each session incorporated a specific educational objective,

theoretically grounded content, and practical exercises intended to transform psychodynamic constructs such as defense, anxiety, resistance, emotion regulation, object relations, differentiation, and ego functioning into observable and practicable psychological skills. The first session focused on defense mechanisms and emotion regulation and aimed to increase participants' awareness of defensive processes while strengthening their capacity to regulate emotional responses. Participants were introduced to common defense mechanisms and practiced identifying and labeling emotions, observing bodily changes associated with emotional activation, using diaphragmatic breathing, and regulating stress responses. The second session addressed mindfulness and motivation for change and was designed to strengthen the observing function of the ego and enhance readiness for psychological change. Participants practiced present-moment awareness, observation of mind wandering, brief breathing exercises, and openness to emotional experience without immediate avoidance or suppression. The third session focused on resistance and non-attachment, with the aim of decreasing defensive avoidance and increasing participants' tolerance of emotional closeness and affective experience. Exercises included observing patterns within close relationships, identifying dominant emotions, directing attention toward bodily sensations, and writing about primary emotional needs. The fourth session addressed ego differentiation and the quality of object relations and aimed to improve recognition of interpersonal boundaries and reduce relational fusion. Participants learned to distinguish rigid, diffuse, and flexible boundaries, practiced saying no appropriately, and examined their emotional experiences in relationships with significant others. The fifth session focused on adaptive capacity and ego strength and sought to strengthen the ego's ability to respond adaptively under conditions of psychological pressure. Exercises included identifying and confronting the internal critic, practicing reparenting and self-care, and examining personal needs and wishes in relation to excessive superego demands and internal pressure. The sixth session was devoted to anxiety regulation and aimed to increase participants' understanding of the bodily pathways of anxiety and their capacity to tolerate and regulate anxious activation. Participants practiced changing their relationship with anxiety, mindful breathing, mindful walking, tracking muscular manifestations of anxiety, and conducting compassionate body scans. The seventh session focused on ego functions and was designed to strengthen self-observation, reality

testing, emotional tolerance, and adaptive adjustment to reality. Participants practiced observing bodily responses during intense emotional activation, remaining briefly in contact with emotional experiences rather than immediately avoiding them, identifying and examining limiting beliefs, and experimenting with new and more adaptive behavioral responses. Across the seven sessions, the intervention emphasized progressive development of awareness, affect tolerance, regulation of anxiety and defenses, differentiation within relationships, and enhancement of adaptive ego functioning. The control group did not participate in these educational sessions during the intervention period.

2.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and the distribution of study variables in the experimental and control groups. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe categorical demographic variables, including gender and age categories, while appropriate indices of central tendency and dispersion were used to summarize the scores obtained from the study instrument at the pretest and posttest stages. To evaluate the effectiveness of the integrated ego educational model, one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was employed. In this analysis, the posttest score was considered the dependent variable, group membership constituted the independent variable, and the corresponding pretest score was entered as a covariate. Controlling for pretest scores made it possible to adjust post-intervention group comparisons for initial differences in the outcome variable and thereby provide a more precise estimate of the effect attributable to the educational intervention. Before conducting ANCOVA, the relevant statistical assumptions were examined, including the appropriateness of the relationship between the covariate and dependent variable, homogeneity of regression slopes, normality of the distributions, and homogeneity of error variances. Statistical decisions were made at a significance level of .05.

3. Findings and Results

To describe the initial status of the study variables and the changes observed following the intervention, the means and standard deviations of the seven components of the integrated ego were calculated separately for the experimental and control groups at the pretest and posttest

stages. Because the study employed a pretest–posttest design and some differences were observed between the groups at baseline, analysis of covariance was subsequently used to

compare posttest scores while statistically controlling for the corresponding pretest scores. The descriptive statistics for all components of the integrated ego are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Integrated Ego Components at Pretest and Posttest

Variable	Group	n	Pretest M	Pretest SD	Posttest M	Posttest SD
Defense Mechanisms and Emotion Regulation	Control	15	36.40	11.20	31.14	5.78
	Experimental	15	41.80	9.60	58.65	5.87
Mindfulness and Motivation for Change	Control	15	22.50	10.50	38.46	3.91
	Experimental	15	18.90	8.70	57.92	4.03
Resistance and Non-Attachment	Control	15	37.80	7.90	48.98	2.59
	Experimental	15	51.60	8.70	55.02	2.78
Ego Differentiation and Quality of Object Relations	Control	15	20.80	5.92	22.45	4.25
	Experimental	15	21.60	5.47	29.95	4.37
Adaptive Capacity and Ego Strength	Control	15	42.30	6.10	43.70	4.53
	Experimental	15	43.10	5.85	54.90	4.64
Anxiety Regulation	Control	15	20.40	5.80	21.65	4.24
	Experimental	15	20.85	5.60	30.65	4.36
Ego Functions	Control	15	16.80	4.75	18.05	4.00
	Experimental	15	17.20	4.40	24.45	4.12

As shown in Table 1, the posttest means of the experimental group were higher than those of the control group across all seven components of the integrated ego. For defense mechanisms and emotion regulation, the experimental group increased from a pretest mean of 41.80 (SD = 9.60) to a posttest mean of 58.65 (SD = 5.87), whereas the control group decreased from 36.40 (SD = 11.20) to 31.14 (SD = 5.78). For mindfulness and motivation for change, the experimental group showed a marked increase from 18.90 (SD = 8.70) to 57.92 (SD = 4.03), compared with an increase from 22.50 (SD = 10.50) to 38.46 (SD = 3.91) in the control group. Resistance and non-attachment increased from 51.60 (SD = 8.70) to 55.02 (SD = 2.78) in the experimental group and from 37.80 (SD = 7.90) to 48.98 (SD = 2.59) in the control group. Similar patterns favoring the experimental group were observed for ego differentiation and quality of object relations, adaptive capacity and ego strength, anxiety regulation, and ego functions. Specifically, the experimental group reached posttest means of 29.95, 54.90, 30.65, and 24.45, respectively, compared with 22.45, 43.70, 21.65, and 18.05 in the control group. Overall, the descriptive findings indicated a more favorable post-intervention pattern in the experimental group across all dimensions of integrated ego functioning.

Before conducting the analysis of covariance, the assumptions of normality, linearity, homogeneity of variances, and homogeneity of regression slopes were examined for each dependent variable. The Shapiro–Wilk

tests were nonsignificant in both the experimental and control groups for all seven components, with W values ranging from .93 to .97 and all p values exceeding .05, supporting the assumption of normality. The relationships between the corresponding pretest and posttest scores were statistically significant and linear for all components, with F values ranging from 10.66 to 19.42 and p values ranging from .001 to .004. Levene’s tests were nonsignificant for all variables, with F values ranging from 0.29 to 2.41 and p values ranging from .138 to .210, indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of error variances was satisfied. In addition, the interaction between group membership and pretest scores was nonsignificant for every component, with F values ranging from 0.80 to 1.72 and p values ranging from .200 to .383. Therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was also supported. Taken together, these findings indicated that the principal assumptions required for conducting ANCOVA were adequately satisfied for all study variables.

After adjustment for pretest scores, the estimated marginal means remained higher in the experimental group than in the control group for all components of the integrated ego. For anxiety regulation, a higher score represented more favorable functioning in terms of recognizing, tolerating, and regulating anxiety. Table 2 presents the adjusted posttest means and the results of the one-way ANCOVA for the group effect after controlling for pretest scores.

Table 2*Adjusted Posttest Means and One-Way ANCOVA Results for Integrated Ego Components*

Variable	Adjusted M Control	SE	Adjusted M Experimental	SE	F(1, 27)	p	η^2
Defense Mechanisms and Emotion Regulation	31.14	1.45	58.65	1.45	141.75	< .001	.84
Mindfulness and Motivation for Change	38.46	0.94	57.92	0.94	310.50	< .001	.92
Resistance and Non-Attachment	48.98	0.56	55.02	0.56	60.10	< .001	.69
Ego Differentiation and Quality of Object Relations	22.45	1.04	29.95	1.04	30.45	< .001	.53
Adaptive Capacity and Ego Strength	43.70	1.11	54.90	1.11	35.79	< .001	.57
Anxiety Regulation	21.65	1.03	30.65	1.03	34.36	< .001	.56
Ego Functions	18.05	0.97	24.45	0.97	30.45	< .001	.53

As presented in Table 2, after controlling for pretest scores, the effect of group was statistically significant for every component of the integrated ego. The largest intervention effect was observed for mindfulness and motivation for change, $F(1, 27) = 310.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .92$, indicating that 92% of the adjusted variance in posttest scores was associated with group membership. A substantial effect was also found for defense mechanisms and emotion regulation, $F(1, 27) = 141.75$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .84$. Significant group effects were further observed for resistance and non-attachment, $F(1, 27) = 60.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .69$; adaptive capacity and ego strength, $F(1, 27) = 35.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .57$; anxiety regulation, $F(1, 27) = 34.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .56$; ego differentiation and quality of object relations, $F(1, 27) = 30.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .53$; and ego functions, $F(1, 27) = 30.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .53$. In all cases, the adjusted posttest mean was higher in the experimental group than in the control group. Thus, the findings demonstrated that the integrated ego educational model produced statistically significant improvements across all seven dimensions of integrated ego functioning after baseline differences were controlled. The partial eta-squared values, ranging from .53 to .92, further indicated substantial intervention effects across the study outcomes.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of an integrated ego educational model based on object relations theory and Davanloo's psychodynamic approach among university students in Tehran. The findings showed that, after controlling for pretest scores, the experimental group obtained significantly higher posttest scores than the control group across all seven dimensions of integrated ego functioning, including defense mechanisms and emotion regulation, mindfulness and motivation for change, resistance and non-attachment, ego differentiation

and quality of object relations, adaptive capacity and ego strength, anxiety regulation, and ego functions. The magnitude of the observed effects was substantial across all outcomes, with partial eta-squared values ranging from .53 to .92. The strongest effect was observed for mindfulness and motivation for change, followed by defense mechanisms and emotion regulation, while meaningful effects were also found for resistance and non-attachment, adaptive capacity and ego strength, anxiety regulation, ego differentiation and quality of object relations, and ego functions. Taken together, these findings indicate that the integrated educational model was effective not only in improving isolated psychological skills but also in strengthening a coordinated set of ego-related capacities.

The significant improvement in defense mechanisms and emotion regulation can be interpreted in light of the close theoretical relationship between defensive functioning, affect regulation, and ego organization. From a psychodynamic perspective, defense mechanisms serve to regulate internal conflict and protect the individual from overwhelming affect, but rigid or immature defenses can interfere with emotional awareness, reality testing, and adaptive coping. The present intervention explicitly trained participants to identify defensive processes, recognize bodily and emotional signals, label affective states, and regulate stress responses rather than automatically relying on avoidance or suppression. This pattern of improvement is consistent with findings showing significant associations among ego strength, defense styles, object relations, and cognitive emotion regulation (Rastgoo et al., 2023). It is also aligned with evidence indicating that individuals with depression differ from healthy individuals in ego strength, defense mechanisms, and object relations (Bahmaninia & Sohrabi Shegefti, 2024). Furthermore, intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy has been shown to improve defense styles and ego strength in patients with irritable bowel syndrome, supporting the proposition that interventions that

increase awareness of defenses and emotional processes can produce measurable changes in ego-related functioning (Jafari & Joharifard, 2023). Thus, one plausible explanation for the present findings is that the intervention helped participants replace automatic defensive reactions with more reflective and regulated responses to emotionally activating experiences.

The particularly strong effect observed for mindfulness and motivation for change may reflect the central role of self-observation in psychological change. A person cannot modify a recurring emotional or interpersonal pattern without first developing the capacity to observe that pattern as it unfolds. In the present intervention, participants practiced present-moment awareness, observation of mind wandering, brief breathing exercises, and openness to emotional experience. These exercises may have strengthened the observing function of the ego and reduced automatic identification with thoughts and affective reactions. This interpretation is compatible with evidence showing that mentalization is associated with attachment patterns, ego strength, object relations, and the manifestation of anxiety among students (Shojaei & Dehghani, 2023). It is also consistent with findings indicating that psychological interventions can improve cognitive emotion regulation by strengthening awareness and reflective control over internal processes (Roghani et al., 2024). The very large effect found for this dimension may therefore indicate that developing an observing stance was a foundational process that facilitated subsequent changes in other ego capacities.

The findings also demonstrated a significant improvement in resistance and non-attachment. Within Davanloo's psychodynamic framework, resistance is understood as a set of defensive operations that prevent direct access to emotionally significant material. Individuals may distance themselves from affect through intellectualization, avoidance, detachment, excessive rationalization, minimization, or interpersonal withdrawal. The intervention encouraged participants to observe close relationships, identify dominant emotions, focus on bodily experience, and reflect on primary emotional needs. These exercises may have reduced habitual avoidance and increased willingness to remain in contact with affective experiences without immediately defending against them. This interpretation is supported indirectly by studies showing that short-term dynamic psychotherapy can modify defense styles, attachment-related behavior, self-differentiation, and ego strength (Jafari & Joharifard, 2023; Kashefi et al., 2023). The improvement in this dimension

suggests that an educational format can make psychodynamic concepts such as resistance clinically meaningful and experientially accessible even outside a traditional psychotherapy setting.

The significant effect on ego differentiation and quality of object relations is also theoretically important. Object relations theory proposes that individuals organize their emotional and interpersonal worlds through internalized representations of the self and significant others. These representations shape expectations, attachment patterns, boundaries, emotional responses, and the capacity to maintain stable relationships. Poorly integrated object relations can contribute to fusion, instability, interpersonal reactivity, and polarized perceptions of self and others. The present intervention directly addressed rigid, diffuse, and flexible boundaries, encouraged participants to practice saying no, and invited reflection on feelings arising in relationships with significant others. These components may have helped participants distinguish their own needs and emotions from those of others while maintaining relational connection. The findings are consistent with research demonstrating associations between object relations and borderline personality symptoms (Chamani & Najafi, 2018), as well as evidence showing that object-relational patterns are linked to broader psychological decisions and adjustment processes (Hosseini et al., 2024). They are also aligned with studies indicating that interventions based on object relations can improve self-regulation, coherence, self-awareness, and relational functioning (Hazratzadeh et al., 2023; Sarlak & Talebi, 2025).

The improvement in adaptive capacity and ego strength further supports the multidimensional nature of the intervention. Ego strength refers to the capacity to maintain psychological organization under conditions of stress, conflict, and emotional pressure. Individuals with stronger ego functioning are better able to tolerate frustration, regulate impulses, manage internal demands, and respond flexibly to external circumstances. The present intervention targeted these capacities through exercises involving confrontation with the internal critic, reparenting, self-care, and regulation of personal needs in the face of excessive superego pressure. These techniques may have reduced internal punitive processes and increased the participants' ability to respond to stress in a more balanced and adaptive manner. This interpretation is consistent with findings showing that ego strength mediates or contributes to the relationship between object relations and important psychological outcomes, including identity states and

marital commitment (Nikosafat & Qarebaghi, 2020; Rajabi et al., 2024). Similarly, structural research has demonstrated that ego strength is closely linked with object relations and personality organization (Oveisi et al., 2023). The present findings therefore support the view that ego strength is not merely a stable dispositional trait but a capacity that can be enhanced through structured psychological training.

The significant improvement in anxiety regulation can be understood particularly well within Davanloo's psychodynamic model. In this framework, anxiety is not regarded solely as a symptom but also as an indicator of activation of emotionally significant material. The therapeutic task involves identifying how anxiety is manifested in the body, distinguishing it from defenses and underlying feelings, and increasing the person's capacity to tolerate anxiety without becoming dysregulated. In the present intervention, participants practiced mindful breathing, mindful walking, tracking muscular pathways of anxiety, and compassionate body scanning. These techniques likely increased interoceptive awareness and reduced automatic fear of anxiety-related sensations. The findings are consistent with evidence showing that accelerated short-term psychodynamic therapy can improve ego functions in patients with generalized anxiety disorder (Mortazavi et al., 2024). They are also compatible with research demonstrating that object relations and defensive functioning are implicated in anxiety-related problems, including social anxiety (Mesgarian et al., 2017). The improvement observed in the present study may therefore reflect increased ability to recognize anxiety as a tolerable psychological and bodily experience rather than as an uncontrollable threat.

The effect of the intervention on ego functions provides additional support for the overall theoretical framework. Ego functions include capacities such as self-observation, reality testing, affect tolerance, impulse regulation, judgment, adaptation, and the ability to distinguish internal experience from external reality. The final session of the intervention specifically addressed these capacities by training participants to observe bodily reactions during intense emotional states, remain briefly in contact with affect, examine limiting beliefs, and experiment with new behaviors. Such exercises may have strengthened participants' capacity to respond to internal states with greater reflection and flexibility. This finding is consistent with evidence showing that ego functions can improve following psychodynamic interventions (Mortazavi et al., 2024). It also aligns with research indicating that ego

functions and object relations mediate the relationship between family functioning and mental health (Shafagh Doust & Shahamat Deh Sorkh, 2019). These findings collectively reinforce the idea that ego functioning represents a modifiable psychological system that can be strengthened through focused intervention.

Another important implication of the present findings is that the seven dimensions appeared to respond coherently to the intervention rather than changing independently. This supports the conceptualization of integrated ego functioning as a network of mutually reinforcing capacities. Defense mechanisms influence access to affect; anxiety regulation determines whether emotionally significant experiences can be tolerated; mindfulness facilitates observation of internal processes; object relations influence expectations and boundaries in relationships; differentiation supports autonomy without emotional detachment; and ego strength enables adaptive functioning under pressure. Existing studies support these interconnections. For example, ego strength has been shown to operate in relation to object relations, identity, personality organization, and marital commitment (Nikosafat & Qarebaghi, 2020; Oveisi et al., 2023; Rajabi et al., 2024). Likewise, relationships among defense styles, object relations, cognitive emotion regulation, attachment, and mentalization have been demonstrated in different populations (Rastgoo et al., 2023; Shojaei & Dehghani, 2023). Therefore, the broad pattern of improvement observed in the present study is theoretically plausible because strengthening one ego-related process may facilitate improvement in others.

The results are also consistent with the growing body of research showing that object-relational and psychodynamic interventions can affect multiple psychological domains. Short-term object relations interventions have been associated with improvements in self-awareness, social anxiety, and alexithymia (Sarлак & Talebi, 2025), while object relations therapy has been shown to improve coherence and self-regulation (Hazratzadeh et al., 2023). Mentalization-based group therapy has produced improvements in object relations and emotion regulation difficulties (Maleki et al., 2025), and intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy has demonstrated effects on alexithymia, defense styles, ego strength, self-differentiation, and attachment behavior (Jafari & Joharifard, 2023; Kashefi et al., 2023). Research on fibromyalgia has further suggested that object relations may influence symptom experience through mediating psychological processes such as alexithymia and self-

compassion (Omidi Cheshmeh Kabood et al., 2025). Together, these findings strengthen the interpretation that relational representations and ego-regulatory capacities are clinically and educationally malleable.

The present study extends previous research by integrating several of these constructs into a single psychoeducational model rather than targeting one process in isolation. This integrative feature may explain the large effects observed across several components. Instead of teaching emotion regulation independently from relational functioning, or mindfulness independently from defensive awareness, the program linked these processes conceptually and experientially. Participants were taught to observe emotional and bodily activation, recognize defensive reactions, examine interpersonal boundaries, tolerate anxiety, reflect on internalized relational patterns, and practice more adaptive responses. Such an approach may generate synergistic effects because improvement in one domain facilitates engagement with another. For example, increased mindfulness may make defenses more visible, improved anxiety tolerance may reduce resistance, and greater differentiation may enhance object-relational functioning. This integrative logic is consistent with the multidimensional evidence linking ego strength, defense mechanisms, object relations, and emotion regulation across both clinical and nonclinical populations (Bahmaninia & Sohrabi Shegefti, 2024; Rastgoo et al., 2023).

5. Conclusion

The findings are particularly relevant for university students because this developmental period is characterized by increasing demands for autonomy, identity consolidation, emotional independence, occupational planning, and intimate relationship formation. These demands can activate unresolved object-relational patterns and place substantial pressure on ego capacities. Research among student populations has repeatedly demonstrated the relevance of ego strength, identity, object relations, mentalization, and mental health (Nikosafat & Qarebaghi, 2020; Shafagh Doust & Shahamat Deh Sorkh, 2019; Shojaei & Dehghani, 2023). Therefore, interventions aimed at strengthening integrated ego functioning may have preventive value even among individuals who do not meet criteria for a psychiatric disorder. The psychoeducational format used in the present study may be especially suitable for university counseling centers because it can translate relatively complex

psychodynamic concepts into structured exercises that are accessible to students.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of the present study. First, the sample consisted of only 30 university students from Tehran, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other populations, age groups, educational settings, and cultural contexts. Second, the quasi-experimental design may not control all possible confounding variables to the same extent as a fully randomized controlled trial. Third, the outcomes were assessed immediately after the intervention, and no follow-up assessment was included; therefore, the durability of the observed changes over time cannot be established. Fourth, the study relied primarily on questionnaire-based assessment, which may be influenced by self-report bias, response tendencies, and participants' awareness of their group assignment. Finally, because several components of integrated ego functioning are conceptually related, some overlap among the measured dimensions may have contributed to the pattern of findings.

Future studies should replicate the present research with larger and more diverse samples drawn from different universities, cities, age groups, and clinical and nonclinical populations. Randomized controlled trials are recommended to strengthen causal inference and reduce the potential effects of selection bias. Future research should also include follow-up assessments at multiple intervals to determine whether the effects of the intervention are maintained over time. It would be useful to compare the integrated ego educational model with established interventions such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, mentalization-based approaches, mindfulness-based programs, and short-term psychodynamic therapy. Researchers may also examine potential mediators and moderators of treatment response, including baseline ego strength, attachment style, personality organization, emotion regulation difficulties, and severity of psychological distress. Incorporating behavioral, clinician-rated, and physiological measures in addition to self-report instruments would further strengthen the assessment of intervention outcomes.

The integrated ego educational model may be used as a structured psychoeducational program in university counseling centers, psychological clinics, and preventive mental health services. Practitioners may use the seven-session framework to help clients and students increase awareness of defensive patterns, improve emotional identification and regulation, strengthen mindfulness and motivation for change, reduce avoidant resistance, develop

healthier interpersonal boundaries, enhance adaptive ego strength, regulate anxiety, and improve reality-oriented ego functioning. The model may be particularly useful as a brief group-based intervention for individuals experiencing emotional dysregulation, interpersonal difficulties, anxiety, or problems with self-differentiation who do not necessarily require intensive long-term psychotherapy. Training counselors and psychologists in the theoretical foundations and practical exercises of the model could facilitate standardized implementation while preserving the psychodynamic logic underlying the intervention.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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