



Does Social Anxiety Affect Student Learning?

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ABSTRACT

In 1994, social anxiety was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual as another term for social phobia (Bögels et al., 2010). More recent editions of the DSM define social anxiety disorder as a persistent fear of situations in which the patient may be exposed to unfamiliar people or potential review by others and causes those who suffer from it to either avoid social situations or endure them with high levels of anxiety. Those who suffer from social anxiety engage in consistent monitoring of their own behavior to avoid displaying any signs of their anxiety (Richards, 2022). While this fear is typically associated with only social or performance situations, social anxiety may also influence student learning as well. The conductors of this study hypothesize that students with social anxiety disorder may process less of the information that is presented to them in a classroom setting due to consistently monitoring their own behavior. These same students may also avoid asking clarifying questions within the classroom or seeking help outside of the classroom setting for fear of being viewed negatively by either their professor or their peers. The conductors of this study propose an online survey which will record participants' responses to a Social Interaction Anxiety Scale, as well as their GPA scores, and responses to questions regarding their coping mechanisms and how often they ask questions in the classroom and seek outside help with their classes. A literature review is conducted, and an explanation of the methods and materials used is provided, as well as their purpose. The limitations of the study are reported, along with measures the conductors have taken to minimize the effects of these limitations.

DOES SOCIAL ANXIETY AFFECT STUDENT LEARNING?

In 1980, social phobia was included in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. In the fourth edition, in 1994, social anxiety disorder was written in as another term for social phobia (Bögels et al., 2010). In the fifth edition of the DSM, social anxiety disorder is defined as, "A persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others. The individual fears that he or she will act in a way (or show anxiety symptoms) that will be embarrassing and humiliating. Exposure to the feared situation almost invariably provokes anxiety, which may take the form of a situationally bound or situationally pre-disposed Panic Attack" (Richards, 2022). Those who suffer from social anxiety fear that they will be embarrassed, either by their anxiety symptoms or their general behavior. Due to this fear, people with social anxiety disorder either

avoid social situations in which they may be subject to scrutiny, or they suffer through them with extreme anxiety and nervousness (Richards, 2022).

The conductors of this study hypothesize that the fear of negative evaluation felt by those with social anxiety affects their performance in their academic pursuits. The consistent monitoring of their own behavior could lead those with social anxiety to focus on themselves rather than the material being presented in a classroom. This would likely result in less information being retained by the student. The fear of being viewed negatively by others would possibly cause students with social anxiety to refrain from asking clarifying questions in class or seeking outside assistance with their work, either through tutoring or meeting with their professor outside of class. The purpose of this study is to discover how social anxiety may prevent students from performing to their highest potential in their academic pursuits.

If educators can understand the ways in which the behavior of students with social anxiety disorder are limited, they may be able to help their students perform to their highest potential. The fear of negative evaluation by either the educator or their peers may keep students from asking questions or seeking outside help, but if the educator makes a conscious effort to keep their classroom or themselves from being intimidating figures, students who were afraid to speak to them may be more willing to ask them for help. Some students may refrain from seeking tutoring services due to fear of engaging in conversation with a stranger. If these students could be provided with tutoring services that did not force them to meet with a stranger face-to-face, they may be more willing to seek out tutoring services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Think, pair, freeze: The association between social anxiety and student discomfort in the active learning environment

The study was conducted by several researchers from multiple universities and was performed to determine whether social anxiety influenced student learning within the active learning environment. The active learning environment is described as a learning environment in which students are encouraged to discuss concepts and engage in activities together, often in small groups. Researchers performed three studies; the first had students respond to the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale and compared their results with discomfort within the active learning environment. They found that students with higher scores of social anxiety reported higher levels of discomfort within the active learning environment. The second study replicated the first and gathered course performance reports for the participating students from earlier in the semester. They found that students with higher rates of social anxiety who performed well earlier in the semester continued to report higher rates of discomfort within the active learning environment.

The third study replicated the processes of the first two and gathered students' final course grades at the end of the semester. The researchers found that as students reported higher rates of social anxiety and discomfort within the active learning environment, their final course grades decreased, whereas students who suffered from social anxiety but reported lower scores of discomfort within the active learning environment did not experience an effect on their final course grades. The study found that the active learning environment seems to cause discomfort in students with social anxiety disorder, and more discomfort experienced within the active learning environment by a socially anxious student results in lower course grades.

DSM-5 DEFINITION OF SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER

This is an article which provides the definition of social anxiety disorder from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual's fifth edition. The author also notes the specific changes made when writing the fifth edition. The author goes on to explain that while this is the clearest and most recent definition of social anxiety, it was still written many years ago, and for it to be as accurate as possible, it needs to be updated. They also point to specific areas where the definition needs to be revised to be as clear and relevant to the current understanding of social anxiety as possible.

Social anxiety disorder: questions and answers for the DSM-5

Researchers conducted a literature review which assessed the criteria for social anxiety disorder that were specified in the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. They also reviewed the research sources used for the fifth edition and used their findings to provide suggestions for the fifth edition of the DSM. Researchers found that the definitions for social anxiety disorder and avoidant personality disorder experience a severe overlap within the DSM-IV. The results of the study state that social anxiety disorder appears to exist along a spectrum, each point of which is defined by the number of fears held by the patient. One suggestion they provided was that the DSM-5 provide certain specifiers regarding types of social anxiety disorder, including "predominately performance" and "fear of showing anxiety symptoms". They found that while a patient may experience some of the major fears associated with social anxiety disorder, they may not experience others. They believed this to be a justification for providing specifiers within the DSM-5.

Social anxiety disorder and marijuana use problems: The mediating role of marijuana effect expectancies

This study was conducted to determine what underlying mechanisms affected the susceptibility of individuals with social anxiety disorder to effects of marijuana use. Researchers investigated marijuana users who also met the criteria for social anxiety disorder. They found that social anxiety disorder was the only factor among several, including major depressive disorder, marijuana use frequency, and other anxiety disorders, which was significantly associated with marijuana use problems within the three months preceding the study. Researchers also found that marijuana users with social anxiety disorder were more likely to support certain expected effects of marijuana use, such as cognitive/behavioral impairment.

Coping motivated alcohol use: The role of social anxiety and dissociation

This study was conducted to examine the relationship between dissociation, social anxiety, coping motives, and alcohol consequences. Researchers recruited students from a large public university who reported using alcohol within the thirty days preceding the study. Participants completed measures for social anxiety, dissociation, alcohol motives, and alcohol consequences, as well as other questions designed by the researchers. The conductors of the study found that dissociation did not influence the relationship between social anxiety and coping mechanisms, but they did find that coping motives mediated the relationship between alcohol consequences and social anxiety, and that dissociation was associated with alcohol consequences through coping motives.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Online Survey

Participants will respond to an online survey that will include questions regarding their demographic information, experiences with social anxiety, both in general and in the academic environment, and any maladaptive coping mechanisms they may engage in. The participants will be asked about their demographic information to allow for any potential effects different demographics may have on results. Participants will then be asked to provide their overall GPA score at Texas A&M University -Commerce. This will be done to provide a measurement of the academic success of the students, so that the researchers will be able to make a conclusion regarding whether social anxiety affects their academic performance. Participants will then be asked about their general experiences with social anxiety via the twelve-item Social Interaction Anxiety Scale, which will be elaborated on in a future section. The conductors of the experiment will then inquire about the experiences of the participants with social anxiety in their academic careers.

The next section of the survey will ask participants about their coping habits. Specifically, participants will be asked to rate how often they have engaged in certain maladaptive coping behaviors. The behaviors that will be inquired about are the consumption of alcohol, use of illicit drugs, use of tobacco, binge eating, and gambling for money. The purpose of this section of the survey is to allow for participants whose answers may be affected by their engagement in any of these behaviors. Participants will first be asked at what age they began binge eating, with the option of selecting 'never' for those who have never engaged in binge eating. They will then be asked to rate how many times they have engaged in binge eating within the last week, again with the option of selecting 'never' for those who have not engaged in binge eating within the last week. Finally, they will be asked to rate how positively or negatively their family and/or peers regard binge eating. This final question is included to allow for any potential outside influences regarding this coping mechanism. This pattern of questions will be repeated for consumption of alcohol, use of tobacco, use of illicit drugs, and gambling for money.

Participants will be asked about their coping mechanisms because of the possible effects these coping mechanisms may have on their mindsets and behaviors. According to Matthew Cook et al, there is a positive relationship between social anxiety and the amount of alcohol related symptoms experienced by undergraduate students (Cook et al, 2020). According to this same article, students with social anxiety disorder are more likely to consume alcohol for coping purposes (Cook et al, 2020). Another study conducted by Julia Buckner and Norman Schmidt states that social anxiety disorder is related to increased effects of marijuana use and undergraduate students with social anxiety disorder are more likely to experience dependence on marijuana when compared to the general population (Buckner, Schmidt, 2009). This study also refers to previous studies in which it was found that higher levels of social anxiety among marijuana users were positively correlated with cognitive impairment as well as effects (Buckner, Schmidt, 2009). Due to the evidence which suggests that adults who engage in alcohol consumption and marijuana use as coping mechanisms experience greater effects related to these practices, the conductors of this study have decided that these and other maladaptive coping mechanisms should be considered when examining the data and have therefore included questions regarding these practices in the survey.

The final section of the survey will ask participants about their experiences with social anxiety in their academic careers. Participants will first be asked to rate how often they ask questions within the classroom, and to explain their answer. Due to the tendency of those with social anxiety to withdraw from activities that may cause them to be the center of attention, researchers hypothesize that those who score higher on the social anxiety scale will report lower rates of asking questions within the classroom. Participants will then be asked to explain their answers; this will be done to allow for students who score significantly on the social anxiety scale but do not often ask questions in the classroom because they feel that they fully understand the material. Next, participants will be asked to rate how often they ask for help outside of the classroom, for example, making appointments with their professors or seeking out tutoring services. Participants will then be asked to explain their answers to this question as well, for the same reason as specified above.

Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS)

The conductors of the study will incorporate the twelve-item Social Interaction Anxiety Scale, or SIAS. The twelve-item SIAS is a questionnaire which assesses general fears regarding social interaction and scrutiny (Cohen et al., 2019). The questionnaire provides a set of statements and prompts those who take it to rate on a scale how well they feel each statement describes them. Each statement refers to a symptom of social anxiety, for example, "I have difficulty talking with other people" (Cohen et al, 2019). The questionnaire is designed to assign a numerical value to responses given by participants regarding to what degree each comment describes them.

LIMITATIONS

The study will suffer from a restricted number of participants. Because participating in research projects such as this one is required only of psychology and nursing students, it is unlikely that students outside of these departments will participate. This will greatly reduce the number of subjects taking part in the study. However, the conductors of this study predict that around 200 students may still participate in the study. Another limitation of the study is the reliance on answers from the participants. Because one of the questions regarding coping mechanisms asks whether participants engage in the use of illegal substances, if there are participants who do engage in this behavior, they may be unwilling to respond truthfully due to fear of being reported. Another question asks participants whether they engage in the consumption of alcohol as a coping mechanism. If there are participants who are underage yet consume alcohol, they may also be unwilling to respond truthfully for fear of being reported. To promote truthful responses, the conductors will provide a reminder of confidentiality practices before participants answer these questions.

CONCLUSION

The conductors of this study believe that students who suffer from social anxiety disorder feel its effects in every aspect of their lives, including their academic pursuits. The fear of being viewed negatively by others is not limited to situations in which they are performing or engaging in conversation with strangers but is present in every public situation they encounter. Students with social anxiety may experience fear of negative evaluation by their peers while sitting quietly in a classroom, making it more difficult for them to process information they receive during their classes. This same fear may prevent them from asking clarifying questions in the classroom or seeking help from outside sources, resulting in lowered performance in

their academic pursuits. By understanding how students' actions are affected by social anxiety disorder, educators can better assist these students. Whether by providing online tutoring opportunities, or simply trying to keep classrooms and teachers from being sources of anxiety for these students, schools may be able to assist their students with social anxiety disorder perform to their fullest potential if they understand the ways in which this disorder affects their behavior in the academic field.

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