Causes of Social Anxiety among Elementary Grade Children

Attiya Inam^{*}, Adeela Mahjabeen^{*} and Muhammad Abiodullah^{**}

Abstract

The present study was conducted as an extension of an earlier study which examined the prevalence of social anxiety among elementary school children. This study, as a further step of the first study, tried to find out the causes of social anxiety among elementary grade children. The objective of the study was to find out the major causes of social anxiety in elementary grade children. Structured interview schedules were used to collect data from 30 boys and 30 girls from Central Model School and Government Girls High School, Samanabad respectively. These boys and girls had already been identified as having social anxiety in the previous study. The findings of the present study indicated that the major cause of social anxiety among both boys and girls was their personal thinking factor.

Keywords: Social anxiety, prevalence, causes, elementary, grade, children

^{*}Assistant Professor, Government College of Home Economics, Gulberg Lahore.

^{**} Assistant Professor, Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab, Lahore

Introduction

Feeling anxiety and nervousness while speaking or presenting in public is common among many people. However, if this turns into persistent and irrational fear of situations and impedes everyday activities in addition to making it hard to make and keep friends, this feeling is called Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) or Social Phobia (Hub, 2002). It is expressed as the "fear of disgrace in social and/or performance situations, which can result in avoidance of social situations, social withdrawal and remoteness" (APA, 2000).There has been an increased recognition during the last two decades that children also suffer from this disorder (Beidel, 1991; Rubin, & Burgess, 2001). Achenbach and Edelbrock (1984) concluded that anxiety disorder is one of the disorders of childhood.

The definite cause of social anxiety is still unidentified, but the research supports that multiple causes including biological, genetic and environment contribute to an increase in anxiety (Morris, 2001; Rapee, 2001).Literature elaborates that causes of social anxiety can be classified into four theoretical models. The skills deficit model assumes that social anxiety occurs due to inappropriate social skills that often result in awkward social encounters and lead subjects to avoid situations that elicit this anxiety. The cognitive self-evaluation model states that negative selfperception results in social anxiety and subjects affected by this overly underestimate themselves and believe that they do not perform well in social situations, even if it is not true. The classical conditioning approach assumes that social anxiety develops when neutral stimuli are followed by negative conditions, hence creating an adverse association with that situation. The fourth model, personality traits approach states that social anxiety occurs due to differences in the emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects of personality and shyness may even have an inherited component. According to Rubin and Asendorpf (2014), withdrawal from the social situation may be result of various causes. White, Bruce, Farrell and Kliewer (1998) indicated the role of environment for the development of social anxiety among children. They also found that girls are more affected in their anxiety by the environmental factors than boys. Rubin, Lemare and Lollis (1990) concluded that the way parents deal with their children and the environment they provide is a major factor for the development of social phobia. Dadds, Barrett, Rapee and Ryan (1996) indicated similar factors in their research. Bruch and Heimberg (1994) also found that parents, who do not socialize their children and isolate them, are more likely to have children with social phobias.

One theory for the cause of social anxiety is that social anxiety runs in families (Aktar, Majdandzic, deVente, & Bogels, 2014), and it is heritable (Beatty et al., 2002). Fyer, Manuzza, Chapman, Liebowitz and Klein (1993) indicated that the relatives of the person with social anxiety are at a 16% higher risk of developing the social phobia in contrast to the 5% risk factors of social phobia in other people. One study of female identical twins suggested 30 percent heritability of social phobias (Kendler, Neale, & Kessier, 1992).

Crick and Dodge(1994) concluded that the children who lack confidence in their abilities and are aggressive, are more likely to have less social interaction which causes social phobia. Kuhn, Balter and Tamis-LeMonda (1999) also confirmed that the lack of confidence in one's own abilities leads to the development of social phobia. Cederlund (2013) further pointed out that parents' over protectiveness compelled children to lack the capability to deal with anxiety provoking situations which further leads to social anxiety. Some researchers believe that socially withdrawn behavior reflects underlying thoughts and feelings of social anxiety, loneliness, insecurity, and depression (Rubin, Chen, & Hymel, 1993; Rubin, Chen, McDougall, Bowker, & McKinnon, 1995).

Due to its pervasiveness and insidious nature, social anxiety disorder has garnered worldwide attention of researchers and psychologists in the recent years. However, most of the studies are conducted in the western countries and this research area remains vacant in Pakistan. Therefore, the present study was conducted as an attempt to find out the causes of this wide spreading disorder in countries like Pakistan where the research is lacking in this field.

Objective

• To identify the major causes of social anxiety among students at elementary school level.

Method

The present study was descriptive in nature. In the first phase, 120 elementary school boys and 120 elementary school girls were randomly selected from two government schools in Lahore. Of these 240 participants, 60 students (30 boys and 30 girls) were identified as suffering from social anxiety, having scored more than 27 on the Social Anxiety Scale. These 60 students were further interviewed to identify the causes of social anxiety.

Participants

The participants of the study were 60 students (30 boys and 30 girls) purposely selected from a random sample of 120 students in two government schools in Lahore. These students were identified based on their score on the Social Anxiety Scale.

Instruments used

Two instruments were used for the current research. A 22 item checklist was used to check the level of social anxiety. Children were rated on 3-point Likert scale (never, sometimes and always) in which the maximum score of 44 could be obtained which represented profound social anxiety. Scores from 27 to 44 suggested that the student was suffering from the disorder at a significant level. Children identified with social anxiety were further interviewed to identify the causes of social anxiety. A list of indicators was used containing 24 questions based on different causes of social anxiety. The students had to answer each question in Yes or No. The checklist was based on the major causative factors of social anxiety, namely, social environmental and personal thinking factors. Twelve questions were asked about each factor. Keeping in view the low level of English understanding of the participants, it was first developed in English and then translated in Urdu. In order to rule out the respondents' influence on each other, all questions were asked by the researchers themselves from each student individually and privately.

Procedure

A formal request was made to the administrative staff of both Central Model School and Government Model Girl's High School Samanabad for conducting this research. After getting the permission, the researcher personally visited the schools and interacted with participants. Before the formal collection of data, students were asked to fill the consent form. It was a two-staged study. During the first stage a 22 item checklist was used to check the level of social anxiety. Children identified with social anxiety were further interviewed in the second stage to identify the causes of social anxiety. The response obtained was recorded on the indicator checklist by the researcher. Scores were given by the following criteria: No = 0 and Yes = 1.Fisher exact test was used to test association between two categorical variables.

Results

Table 1

Social Environmental Factors Responsible for Social Anxiety

			Boys		Girls	
		(n=30)		(n=30)		exact
						test
Sr#	Statements	f	%	f	%	р
1	Effect of Socially Anxious Behavior of siblings	18	60	21	70	.271
2	Effect of Bad Social experience of Siblings	12	40	11	37	.793
3	Effect of Socially Anxious Behavior of Parents	9	30	7	23	.771
4	Effect of Unsocial Personality of Parents	19	63	18	60	1.00
5	Effect of Overprotective Behavior of Parents	28	93	28	93	1.00
6	Effect of Parental Non-Encouragement	3	10	11	37	.030*
7	Effect of Social Authoritative Conduct of Parents	11	37	3	10	1.00
8	Effect of Least Concerned Behavior of Parents	8	27	7	23	1.00
9	Effect of Negative Reactions of Teachers	13	43	20	67	.119
10	Observational Learning through Bad Experience of	19	63	15	50	.435
	Friends					
11	Effect of Peer Pressure and Culture	14	47	16	53	.797
12	Lack of Opportunities to Participate in Social events	0	0	3	10	.237
	at school					

*p<.05



Figure 1 Social Environmental Factors Responsible for Social Anxiety

Table 2

Personal Thinking Factors Responsible for Social Anxiety (N=60)

		Boys		Gi	rls	Fisher
				(n=	30)	exact
		(n=	(n=30)			test
Sr#	Statements	f	%	f	%	р
1	Avoidance of Being Center of Attraction	24	80	22	73	.761
2	Avoidance of Class Participation and Leadership	11	37	15	50	.434
3	Concern about Showing Approved Behavior	27	90	25	83	.707
4	Focusing Attention on Irrelevant Things	14	47	19	63	.299
5	Thinking that They Are Incapable of Social Situation	13	43	20	67	.119
6	Sensitive to Criticism	27	90	28	93	1.00
7	Conscious of Seeking Admiration from Everyone	28	93	29	97	1.00
8	Afraid that People Might be Watching Critically	24	80	20	67	.382
9	Fear of Embarrassment among Public	23	77	18	60	.267
10	Stay Away from Participation in Social Events at School	14	47	14	47	1.00
11	Fear of Looking Stupid among Others	21	70	23	77	.771
12	Bad Childhood Experience	13	43	9	30	.422



Figure 2 Personal Thinking Factors Responsible for Social Anxiety

Gender and effect of socially anxious behavior of siblings were two categorical variables. To test association between gender and effect of socially anxious behavior of siblings fisher exact test was conducted, p=.271 shows that effect of socially anxious behavior of siblings for boys and girls was same.

Discussion

The results of the current study indicated that among all the environmental and personal thinking factors observed as the main cause of social anxiety, only the parents' non-encouragement was found to have significant effect on the social anxiety of children. According to Bogels and Stein (2009) there is a little research on individual or environmental factors that cause social anxiety. The present study found that socially anxious behaviour of parents have no significant effect on the social anxiety of children whereas Ginsburg and Schlossberg (2002) have found that socially anxious parents have greater chances of having socially anxious children. Cederlund (2013) took the review of previous studies and found 3.5% increased risk of anxiety disorders in children having parents with the anxiety disorder.

Bad childhood experience was not found to be significantly responsible for the social anxiety of children. This result can relate to the results of Al-Naggar (2012), on University students, in which a majority of the students with social anxiety were found to have no childhood abuse of any kind.

The current study indicated that authoritative conduct of parents had no significant effect on the social anxiety, which is in contrast to the finding of Whaley, Pinto and Sigman (1999) which found that poor family environment, specially the over control of parents and their criticism on children contribute to the development of social anxiety in children. The over protectiveness of the parents was also found to have no significant effect on social anxiety in current study which is in contrast to the results of Lieb et al. (2000) who found that individuals with social anxiety significantly perceive their parents to be overprotective. This variance may be attributable to two reasons. First, the sample size of the present study may not be large enough to see any significant change in social anxiety due to authoritative parenting. Secondly, for students attending government schools, it may be the norm in their family for parents to be the main decision makers. In the absence of many choices or information, children may consider it normal to obey their parents and do as they are told. It may also be that these children face so many other socio economic problems that authoritative parenting contributes much less to social anxiety relative to other factors. It is suggested that this study be conducted on a larger sample to draw more conclusive results.

Limitations

This study was conducted only on the students of grade 6; the findings therefore, of the study should not be generalized for students of higher level. Moreover, the study was conducted in government schools only and the sample size was small. The research relied on the answers provided by the children.

References

- Achenbach, T. M., & Edelbrock, C. S. (1984). Psychopathology of childhood. Annual Review of Psychology, 35(1), 227-256.
- Aktar, E., Majdandžić, M., Vente, W., & Bögels, S. M. (2014). Parental social anxiety disorder prospectively predicts toddlers' fear/avoidance in a social referencing paradigm. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(1), 77-87.
- Al-Naggar, R. A. (2012). Prevalence and associated factors of phobia and social anxiety among university students. Advisory Board, Associate Editors and Brain Fag Syndrome (BFS), Sleep Editorial Board Members iii-v And Beliefs about Sleep among Secondary School Students in Information for Authors vi Nigeria 165-175, 13(2), 112-121.
- American Psychiatric Association (APA). (2000). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders—fourth edition, text revision. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.
- Asendorpf, J. B. (1993). Abnormal shyness in children. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 34(7), 1069-1083.
- Beatty, M. J., Heisel, A. D., Hall, A. E., Levine, T. R., & La France, B. H. (2002).
 What can we learn from the study of twins about genetic and environmental influences on interpersonal affiliation, aggressiveness, and social anxiety?: A meta-analytic study. *Communication Monographs*, 69(1), 1-18. DOI: 10.1080/03637750216534
- Beidel, D. C. (1991). Social phobia and overanxious disorder in school-age children. Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 30(4), 545-552.

- Beidel, D. C., Turner, S. M., & Morris, T. L. (1995). A new inventory to assess childhood social anxiety and phobia: The Social Phobia and Anxiety Inventory for children. *Psychological Assessment*, 7(1), 73.
- Bögels, S., & Stein, M. (2009). Social phobia: Moving to DSM-V.65-83
- Bruch, M. A., & Heimberg, R. G. (1994). Differences in perceptions of parental and personal characteristics between generalized and nongeneralized social phobics. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 8(2), 155-168.
- Cederlund, R. (2013). Social anxiety disorder in children and adolescents: assessment, maintaining factors, and treatment. Stockholm University.
- Crick, N. R., & Dodge, K. A. (1994). A review and reformulation of social information-processing mechanisms in children's social adjustment. *Psychological bulletin*, *115*(1), 74.
- Dadds, M. R., Barrett, P. M., Rapee, R. M., & Ryan, S. (1996). Family process and child anxiety and aggression: An observational analysis. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 24(6), 715-734.
- Fyer, A. J., Mannuzza, S., Chapman, T. F., Liebowitz, M. R., & Klein, D. F. (1993). A direct interview family study of social phobia. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 50(4), 286-293. doi:10.1001/archpsyc.1993.01820160056007.
- Ginsburg, G. S., & Schlossberg, M. C. (2002). Family based treatment of childhood anxiety disorders. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 14, 143-154.
- Hub, (2002). Social anxiety (Phobia), Goolwa, South Australia 5214, retrieved October 11, 2003 from http:// www.panicattacks.com.au/about/anxdis/sa.html
- Kendler, K. S., Neale, M. C., Kessler, R. C., Heath, A. C., & Eaves, L. J. (1992). The genetic epidemiology of phobias in women: the interrelationship of agoraphobia, social phobia, situational phobia, and simple phobia. *Archives* of General Psychiatry, 49(4), 273.
- Kuhn, D., Balter, L., & Tamis-LeMonda, C. S. (1999). Child psychology: A handbook of contemporary issues. *Ann Arbor, MI: Taylor & Francis.*

- Lieb, R., Wittchen, H-U., Höfler, M., Fuetsch, M., Stein, M. B., & Merikangas, K. R. (2000). Parental psychopathology, parenting styles, and the risk of social phobia in offspring: A prospective-longitudinal community study. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 57,859-866.
- Morris, T. L. (2001). Social phobia. In M.W. Vasey & M. R. Dadds (Eds.), *The developmental psychopathology of anxiety* (pp. 435–458). Oxford: University Press.
- Rapee, R. M. (2001). The development of generalized anxiety disorder. In M. W. Vasey & M. R. Dadds (Eds.), *The developmental psychopathology of anxiety* (pp. 481–504). Oxford: University Press.
- Rubin, K. H., & Asendorpf, J. B. (2014). Social withdrawal, inhibition, and shyness in childhood. Psychology Press.
- Rubin, K. H., & Burgess, K. B. (2001). Social withdrawal and anxiety. *The developmental psychopathology of anxiety*, 407-434.
- Rubin, K. H., LeMare, L. J., & Lollis, S. (1990). Social withdrawal in childhood: Developmental pathways to peer rejection. *Peer rejection in childhood*, 217-249.
- Rubin, K. H., Chen, X., & Hymel, S. (1993).Socioemotional characteristics of withdrawn and aggressive children *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* (1982-), 518-534.
- Rubin, K. H., Chen, X., McDougall, P., Bowker, A., & McKinnon, J. (1995). The Waterloo Longitudinal Project: Predicting internalizing and externalizing problems in adolescence. *Development and Psychopathology*, 7(04), 751-764.
- Whaley, S. E., Pinto, A., &Sigman, M. (1999). Characterizing interactions between anxious mothers and their children. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 67,826–836
- White, K. S., Bruce, S. E., Farrell, A. D., & Kliewer, W. (1998). Impact of exposure to community violence on anxiety: A longitudinal study of family social support as a protective factor for urban children. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 7(2), 187-203.