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SOCIAL ANXIETY IN HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING CONTEXT: SCALE CONSTRUCTION AND RELIABILITY

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Abstract:

This article reviews research study that focuses on the construction of social anxiety scale for the students in higher learning settings. The research study positions scale development methodology by assessing its reliability on the sample identified from a larger population. The scale consisting of 15 items with a provision of 4 Likert response options was administered on a sample of 114 students chosen from the various universities for this study. Cronbach's alpha reliability test was applied and scale presented a high reliability of 0.742.

KEY WORDS:

Construction, Reliability, Education, Methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Social anxiety is found at all stages of human development life span. It is a universal phenomenon of study in all kinds of fields that deal with human factors. In literal terms, it is defined as a feeling of discomfort, uneasiness, and internal fear that a person faces in a particular social situation and social interaction when being evaluated by others. Understanding social anxiety is significant for all corporate and service industry and community based social agencies since the influence of social anxiety on a person can be innumerable and can widely impact their overall personality. Likewise, it is also imperative for the educational industry to understand the dynamics related to social anxiety that students bring with themselves when joining the university. This research study was aimed at developing a tool to explore university students and their social anxiety level as there is a dearth of relevant tools available in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

University is a social institution that provides students with ample opportunities to become professionals and outgrow their strengths. An experience of being at a university can either make or break a student's career. In a university, a student experiences many spheres of life and also develops a self-image that aids in their overall professional persona. The curriculum of any university is embedded with activities that allow the students to experience and practice skills that will facilitate their professional lives. Hence, the curriculum is enriched with many activities like interactive discussions, cooperative learning, public speaking, research, and group work. These activities support students to acquire social skills and competence in relationship management. In the same vein, university climate and administrative support should be inbuilt to facilitate and support individual student needs.

Many students during their first year regardless of their grades tend to learn and get themselves accustomed to these social development activities. However, many students are found to encounter psychosocial problems in universities like talking to opposite gender, participating in public speaking activities, coming in front and speaking, talking to class fellows with ease, doing group work and

participating in collaborative learning activities. Often many university students encounter problems with their peers and other class fellows as well. Such students in the university are advised counseling and opportunities to talk about their anxiety to a university student counselor, whereas in Pakistan, such counseling opportunities are rarely available and as a result students often end up dropping out from their respective programs. It is also observed that there is a lack of internally consistent, reliable, and contextually appropriate measures available with the psychologists or university counselors to pay attention to the developmental health needs of the students. This raised the interest of the researchers to construct a measure that could explore social anxiety level of students in higher learning setup.

The Social Anxiety Scale (SAS) projected anxiety factors in three spheres, that is, a) self, b) social, and c) peer. These facets were considered because social anxiety is a result of perception of self, about self, or self in a social situation (Ruscio, Brown, Chiu, Sareen & Kessler, 2008). There are many contributing factors to social anxiety among college and university students and a number of models have been developed to explore and assess this phenomenon. Many psychologists have developed various models of social anxiety and Schlenker and Leary (1982) in their documentation have divided the models into four major categories that determine or cause social anxiety. The first category focuses on the social domain and answers questions of how lack of social skills contributes to social anxiety. The second category gives an insight from the cognitive model which emphasizes on self-evaluation and perception of self and its influence on social anxiety. The third category evolves from the behavior domain of the development that deals with a person's response to social consequences, and the fourth focuses on personality theory, where individual differences cause social anxiety (Heimberg & Becker, 2002; Rapee & Spence, 2004).

In relation to social skills, social anxiety is driven because of the social factors. It reflects on a person's construct of social domain where a person can talk to other people confidently, can carry a social image, and can relate to others assertively (Wittchen & Fehm, 2003). Likewise, from the cognitive perspective it is vital to understand the know-how that a person has developed about his or her own self-image. In this, self-perception of self-image is developed in the mind. This mental representation of self and events will guide a person to react and perceive situations accordingly or differently. This mental script is a result of past experiences, peer pressure, and unhealthy events in their life and their outcomes in the form of social anxiety (Heimberg, Stein, Hiripi, & Kessler, 2000). This anxiety in mind leads to actual or perceived fear, which may be fear of a person or of a situation. Similarly, behavioral school of thought deals with anxiety as a physiological response to a situation or to a person. It is driven from the classical conditioning theory where there is a relationship between stimuli and response (Cogle, Keough, Riccardi, & Sachs-Erisson, 2009). It is widely observed in educational contexts that when a student with fear or anxiety is called in front of the class, the student shivers or stutters. Similarly, anxiety levels are also associated with events where students are paired with opposite gender classmates or fellow students. From the viewpoint of the personality theory, in most of the circumstances, human beings create their own persona based on the situational requirements. There are many students at the university level who neither tend to participate much in the class discussions nor are they interested to work in pairs and in groups. Such students are often and commonly labeled as 'introverts'. Many of the researchers feel that introverts should be identified by the teachers and kept under close observation. Gracia (2004), Herbert, Rheingold, and Goldstein (2002) consider such students to be victims of anxiety and social fear is embedded in them. These kinds of personality traits result in fear, internal hesitation, lack of self-confidence, and ability to cope with new situation.

Social anxiety is widely found in almost all kinds of educational settings and has its influence on the students' performance, their retention, their developmental health, and the skills of coping and competence (Chen & Drummond, 2008; Woody & Adessky, 2002). Many studies have shown that social anxiety also results in use of alcohol, suicide, crime, and severe bi-polar personality disorder (Norton, 2008; Van Ingen & Novicki, 2009). Hence, it is imperative for the teachers and university management to consider this phenomenon seriously and take appropriate action to intervene for improvement. This study aimed at developing a measure to explore social anxiety level among the university students. Furthermore, the aims of the research study were to construct a scale that would aid facilitators and researchers to explore the level of social anxiety in the university students and to assess the overall scale reliability of the measurement tool being deployed.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The core purpose of this research was to develop a reliable scale to assess the social anxiety of university students. Hence, scale development method was applied. Initially, a draft of 26 items was

developed and this was shared with two psychologists and two university students to see if the items corresponded with the overall theme. Later, the draft tool was updated with the feedback and a final version was developed. Quantitative survey design was used to explore the scale's reliability.

Sampling

Convenient sampling method was considered based on the criterion that the study participants should be university students. A sample of 114 university graduates was chosen for the study to administer the scale.

Measure

The tool consisted of eight items of demographic information and 15 items with a four point Likert's response category (see Appendix A). These items were divided into three facets: a) perceived self-image, b) perceived social image, and c) perceived peer response of self-image.

Procedure

Student volunteers were identified to collect the data on SAS. They were provided with an orientation of the data collection procedure and research ethics before being sent to the field. They were asked to take informed consent from all the participants before administering the tool.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to explore the demographic variables and their frequencies. Cronbach's alpha reliability test was applied to explore the overall scale reliability and also to determine how the items (if deleted) increased or decreased the overall reliability of the scale. Moreover, Pearson r correlation was also applied to assess if all the facets in the scale related to one another.

RESULTS

Table 1 highlights that the overall scale reliability appeared at 0.742 which is rated as good internal consistency. It can also be considered that SAS will be reliable if applied on similar population.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics

| Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items | N of Items |
|--|------------|
| 0.756 | 15.000 |

Table 2 projects the correlation of the three core facets, that is, a) self-image, b) social image, and c) peer image. It be seen that all the facets have positive correlation amongst them.

Table 2. Correlation of Facets

| Facets | Self-Image | Social Image | Peer Image |
|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| Self-Image | | 0.324* | 0.383* |
| Social Image | 0.324* | | 0.488* |
| Peer Image | 0.383* | 0.488* | |

Table 3 shows that if item 1 with $M = 3.3$, $S.D. = 0.806$, item 2 with $M = 2.4$, $S.D. = 0.995$, item 4 with $M = 3.0$, $S.D. = 0.941$, item 5 with $M = 2.9$, $S.D. = 1.11$, item 6 with $M = 3.0$, $S.D. = 0.88$, item 7 with $M = 2.7$, $S.D. = 1.02$, item 8 with $M = 2.6$, $S.D. = 1.04$, item 9 with $M = 3.0$, $S.D. = 0.96$, item 10 with $M = 3.5$, $S.D. = 0.77$, item 11 with $M = 3.3$, $S.D. = 0.74$, item 12 with $M = 2.9$, $S.D. = 0.99$, item 13 with $M = 3.3$, $S.D. = 0.83$, item 14 with $M = 3.6$, $S.D. = 0.73$ and item 15 with $M = 3.5$, $S.D. = 0.72$ if deleted from the scale will result in lower reliability. However, if item 3 with $M = 2.4$, $S.D. = 0.99$ is deleted from the scale it will cause a higher internal consistency and reliability.

Table 3. Analysis of Items if Deleted

| Items | M | S.D | if deleted |
|---|-------|-------|------------|
| 01. I feel comfortable being introduced to new people. | 3.333 | 0.806 | 0.727 |
| 02. I feel comfortable when people watch me doing something. | 2.430 | 0.995 | 0.739 |
| 03. I only have friends of same gender. | 1.798 | 0.961 | 0.779 |
| 04. I feel comfortable with public speaking. | 3.000 | 0.941 | 0.724 |
| 05. I feel comfortable to make friends with people who don't dress like me. | 2.991 | 1.117 | 0.718 |
| 06. I attend university parties and concerts. | 3.009 | 0.887 | 0.725 |
| 07. I go to my university class fellows' place for combined studies. | 2.746 | 1.029 | 0.725 |
| 08. I call my university class fellows' for combined studies at my place. | 2.640 | 1.049 | 0.724 |
| 09. I feel comfortable to sit next to opposite gender class fellows. | 3.096 | 0.968 | 0.715 |
| 10. I feel comfortable to study from a teacher of opposite gender. | 3.518 | 0.778 | 0.717 |
| 11. My friends think that i am confident. | 3.325 | 0.747 | 0.711 |
| 12. My friends think that i am an extrovert. | 2.965 | 0.995 | 0.735 |
| 13. My friends think that i am easily approachable | 3.351 | 0.831 | 0.735 |
| 14. My friends feel comfortable to call me at home. | 3.667 | 0.737 | 0.727 |
| 15. My friends think i can easily talk to opposite gender people. | 3.596 | 0.725 | 0.709 |

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study sought to develop an internally consistent and reliable tool to explore the social anxiety in university students. It aimed to explore factors of perceived self-image, perceived social image, and perceived peer response to self-image. It was found in the statistical analysis of the data that the measure of SAS appeared to be internally consistent and reliable. It was also found that all the facets of the scale have positive correlation. Hence, it can be concluded that the scale will show a high internal consistency if applied on a similar population. The scale can be used by psychologists, mental health practitioners, special educators, university management, student counselors, youth associations, and faculty to explore relevant factors that contribute subjects to social anxiety that results in students to have in-built fears about self, a person or a situation. Overall, the research study achieved its objective of constructing a theoretically grounded and contextually reliable measure.

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APPENDIX A

Social Anxiety in University Students

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| SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION | | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|---|------------------|---------------------|------------------|------|
| # | Variables | Responses | Code | | | |
| D1 | Verbal Consent | Signature: | | | | |
| D2 | Name of the University | | | | | |
| D3 | Province | | | | | |
| D4 | Gender | 1. <input type="checkbox"/> Female 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Male | | | | |
| D5 | Marital Status | 1. <input type="checkbox"/> Single 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Married | | | | |
| D6 | Level of Study | 1. <input type="checkbox"/> Graduate 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Masters 3. <input type="checkbox"/> Post Graduates | | | | |
| D7 | Mode of Study | 1. <input type="checkbox"/> Full Time 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Part Time | | | | |
| D8 | GPA (Last Semester) | 1. <input type="checkbox"/> 3.7 to 4 2. <input type="checkbox"/> 3 to 3.6 3. <input type="checkbox"/> 2 to 2.9 | | | | |
| SECTION B : SOCIAL ANXIETY SCALE | | | | | | |
| # | Items | Responses | | | | Code |
| Keys: | | 1: Never | 2: Rarely | 3: Sometimes | 4: Always | |
| 1 | I feel comfortable being introduced to new people. | | | | | |
| 2 | I feel comfortable when people watch me doing something. | | | | | |
| 3 | I only have friends of same gender. | | | | | |
| 4 | I feel comfortable with public speaking. | | | | | |
| 5 | I feel comfortable to make friends with people who don't dress like me. | | | | | |
| 6 | I attend university parties and concerts. | | | | | |
| 7 | I go to my university class fellows' place for combined studies. | | | | | |
| 8 | I call my university class fellows for combined studies at my place. | | | | | |
| 9 | I feel comfortable to sit next to opposite gender class fellows. | | | | | |
| 10 | I feel comfortable to study from a teacher of opposite gender. | | | | | |
| 11 | My friends think that I am confident. | | | | | |
| 12 | My friends think that I am an extrovert. | | | | | |
| 13 | My friends think that I am easily approachable. | | | | | |
| 14 | My friends feel comfortable to call me at home. | | | | | |
| 15 | My friends think I can easily talk to opposite gender people. | | | | | |

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