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The effects of social anxiety and social skills on academic performance

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Abstract

This 2-year longitudinal study examined whether social anxiety, social skills, and other academic variables affect college grade point average (GPA) and academic persistence. First-year students ($n = 253$) provided baseline data. Those who reported emotional control (e.g. hiding emotions) were less likely to persist. For GPA over the first 2 years of college, predictors included social skills, institutional commitment, academic and social adjustment, high school class rank, quantitative aptitude scores, gender, and ethnicity. Emotional control became a significant predictor of lower GPA by the third semester. Those with higher college adjustment scores, higher class ranks, higher quantitative aptitude scores, and female gender were more likely to earn higher GPAs. Social anxiety did not emerge as a significant predictor of college persistence or GPA.

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1. Introduction

Little is known of the real-life consequences of social anxiety, nor of its course over the entire life span. Social Phobia (also known as Social Anxiety Disorder) has a lifetime prevalence of between 3 and 13% (APA, 1994), and is characterized by extreme distress and/or avoidance of situations in which the individual fears criticism or embarrassment. The purpose of this study was to examine what role, if any, high trait social anxiety plays in an individual's undergraduate

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academic career. The present study also sought to determine whether these effects interact with the student's level of social skills and with college adjustment measures.

1.1. Social anxiety and social skills in the undergraduate experience

Trait social anxiety at high (or even clinical) levels is quite prevalent within a college population. Beidel, Turner, Stanley, and Dancu (1989) found that 19% of undergraduates in their sample met the criteria for a diagnosis of social phobia. The authors did not test the effects of social anxiety on retention or achievement, but did collect confirming evidence from students' significant others (romantic partners, roommates, parents, and siblings), and found that others tended to corroborate students' self-assessments of high levels of social anxiety. Strahan and Conger (1998) found that 33% of a group of undergraduate men recruited from an introductory psychology course at an American university reported social phobia symptoms on the SPAI (Social Phobia and Anxiety Inventory, Turner, Beidel, Dancu, & Keys, 1989) comparable with those of diagnosed social phobics (Beidel et al., 1989).

Because the present study participants were not diagnosed as having social phobia, and were merely classified by level of self-reported social anxiety, the term "socially anxious" will be used to identify those with extremely high levels of social anxiety. However, there appear to be few differences in cognitions and physiological responses between nonclinical participants with clinical levels of social anxiety and diagnosed social phobics (Turner, Beidel, & Larkin, 1986).

Given that social anxiety is quite prevalent in the undergraduate population, what might be some of its effects on academic integration of the students who suffer from social anxiety? The evidence is only indirect. For example, in highly competent (honors) students, high trait social anxiety may contribute to significant levels of student discomfort and dissatisfaction with the undergraduate experience (Langston & Cantor, 1989). In addition, students high in social anxiety tend to underutilize active coping strategies, and report greater evaluation anxiety at critical junctures (Zeidner, 1994). Particularly important for the college setting is the possibility that highly socially anxious individuals may "self-medicate" by engaging in alcohol consumption in order to decrease their distress in social situations (Jefferson, 1995).

More direct evidence about the impact of social phobia on academic performance comes from Turner, Beidel, Borden, Stanley, and Jacob (1991). They found that 91% of a sample of 99 individuals with social phobia reported interference with their academic adjustment. For example, these individuals reported receiving poor grades due to lack of class participation, avoiding classes requiring public speaking, making decisions not to attend graduate school, and deciding to transfer to another college in order to avoid giving oral presentations. There is also some evidence that, for male students at least, high degrees of social anxiety correlate with lower self-image and lower grade point average (GPA; DiMaria & DiNuovo, 1990). So some evidence exists to suggest that social anxiety could have a detrimental effect on a student's college adjustment.

Additionally, there is the question of whether social skill deficits may play a part in poor college adjustment. In discussing this question, it is important not to make assumptions. It is by no means clear that the socially anxious are always socially incompetent, as some clinicians may assume. The socially anxious tend to underrate their performance in many social settings, and to ruminate on their performance even when it seems quite competent to objective observers (Alden & Wallace, 1995; Edelman, 1985; Lucock & Salkovskis, 1988; Pozo, Carver, Wellens, & Scheier, 1991; Strahan & Conger, 1998). This means that self-report of social anxiety may bear little

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