



Self-concept clarity and subjective social status as mediators between psychological *suzhi* and social anxiety in Chinese adolescents



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to test if self-concept clarity and subjective social status mediate between psychological *suzhi* and social anxiety. Participants were 614 Chinese adolescents (40.4% male; aged 12–19 years, $M = 15.49$ years, $SD = 1.76$); they completed measures of psychological *suzhi*, social anxiety, self-concept clarity, and subjective social status. Structural equation modeling was used to test for a mediating effect; self-concept clarity and subjective social status were found to fully mediate between psychological *suzhi* and social anxiety. The indirect effect was stronger via subjective social status than via self-concept clarity. These findings suggest that self-concept clarity and subjective social status underlie psychological *suzhi*'s effect on adolescents' social anxiety.

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1. Introduction

Social anxiety (SA) has been defined as a common human experience characterized by intense fear of evaluation by others in social situations (Morrison & Heimberg, 2013). Social anxiety problems typically begin in adolescence (Gullone, King, & Ollendick, 2001) and may develop into SA disorders (Morrison & Heimberg, 2013), which may continue to affect adults' mental health, academic achievement, if not be corrected or improved (Woodward & Fergusson, 2001). Therefore, research needs to examine factors predicting and underlying SA in order to provide theoretical guidance for correcting or reducing SA among adolescents. Extensive research has examined SA; however, no research has examined if psychological *suzhi* affects SA in adolescents, or aimed to identify a mechanism underlying such an effect.

1.1. Psychological *suzhi* and social anxiety

Psychological *suzhi* (hereafter, *suzhi*) is a Chinese concept first proposed in the context of quality-oriented education (Zhang, Feng, Guo, & Chen, 2000). *Suzhi* has gained acceptance and recognition among Western academia, with related research collected in the Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools (Second Edition), an international authoritative reference book (Furlong, Gilman, & Huebner, 2014). *Suzhi*

is defined as a steady, essential, and implicit mental quality that affects individuals' adaptive, developmental, and creative behavior (Zhang, 2003; Zhang et al., 2000). *Suzhi* is a multi-level self-organized system, involving steady implicit mental qualities and explicit adaptive behavior (Zhang, Wang, & Yu, 2011). Theoretical consideration and empirical research suggest that *suzhi* has three dimensions: cognitive quality, individuality, and adaptability. Cognitive quality is the most basic component and is directly involved in individuals' cognition of objects. Individuality is reflected in individuals' actions towards objects, although it is not directly involved in individuals' cognition of objects; it is a core component of *suzhi*, is related to the concept of personality, and has a motivating and moderating function during cognition. Adaptability governs individuals' ability to achieve consistence between themselves and the environment by changing themselves or the environment during socialization. Simultaneously, adaptability is a reliable indicator of the other two dimensions' activity in various social environments (Zhang et al., 2011). Research results indicate that interventions could help children and adolescents to cultivate their *suzhi* (Zhang, Yu, & Wang, 2014; Zhang et al., 2011).

Models of *suzhi*'s relationship with mental health suggest that *suzhi* is a stable mental quality, whereas mental health is a favorable and positive psychological state (Zhang & Wang, 2012). The relationship between *suzhi* and mental health parallels the relationship between "essence" and "surface". *Suzhi* directly predicts individuals' mental health; mental health indicates sound *suzhi* (Zhang et al., 2011). For example, *suzhi* is significantly negatively correlated with problem behavior in children (Wu, Zhang, Cheng, Hu, & Rost, 2015), and significantly reduces the likelihood of depression in adolescents (Hu & Zhang,

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2015). In contrast, SA indicates relatively poor mental health; therefore, we hypothesized that *suzhi*'s relationship with SA and mental health would be similar and that *suzhi* directly predicts adolescents' SA.

In summary, *suzhi* is likely to predict reduced SA in adolescents. Simultaneously, adolescence is critical in the development of both *suzhi* and SA. Examination of *suzhi*'s association with SA may extend the understanding of SA's causes and inform new interventions targeting SA.

1.2. Psychological *suzhi*, self-concept clarity, and social anxiety

Erikson's self-identity crisis theory suggests that adolescents need to address the crisis of self-identity and role-confusion, if this crisis is successfully resolved, the individual will form the virtue of loyalty; if not, the individual will become uncertain and callous and feel a lack of belonging and cold indifference. Adolescents face major internal physiological development and the challenge of becoming responsible adults; these challenges lead to increased self-concern (Erikson, 1968).

Campbell and Lavelle (1993) proposed "self-concept clarity" (SCC) as the confident and clear definition of the individual's self-concept. SCC is temporally stable and internally consistent (Campbell, Assanand, & Paula, 2003) and reflects the integration of the individual's self-concept (Xu, 2007). Clark and Wells' SA model suggests that individuals' self-concept importantly affects the formation of SA Clark and Wells (1995); for example, SCC is negatively correlated with anxiety and depression (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996; Constantino, Wilson, Horowitz, & Pintel, 2006; Xu, 2007), and may protect against anxiety and depression (Campbell et al., 2003), suggesting that SCC indicates positive mental health. Social anxiety is a central form of anxiety; therefore, SCC may be negatively correlated with, and protect against, SA. In this context, we predicted that SCC mediates between *suzhi* and adolescents' SA.

1.3. Psychological *suzhi*, subjective social status, and social anxiety

Subjective social status (SSS) refers to the individual's subjective perception and belief of his or her social class (Singh-Manoux, Adler, & Marmot, 2003). SSS may more accurately capture the consequential aspects of social status than socioeconomic status (SES; Goodman et al., 2003). Adolescents and emerging adults from low-SES families more commonly experience SA (Cheng, Zhang, & Ding, 2015). Therefore, given Goodman's suggestion that SSS more accurately captures the consequential aspects of social status than SES Goodman et al. (2003), SSS may negatively predict adolescents' SA. SSS is significantly positively correlated with self-esteem in adolescents (Hu, Wang, Cai, Zhu, & Yao, 2012). SSS and self-esteem both involve a degree of self-evaluation. Additionally, *suzhi* significantly positively predicts adolescents' self-esteem (Liu, Zhang, Pan, Chen, & Ma, 2016). Therefore, *suzhi* may be correlated with adolescents' SSS. In this context, we predicted that SSS importantly mediates between *suzhi* and adolescents' SA.

1.4. The current study

This study examined the associations between *suzhi*, SCC, SSS, and SA among Chinese adolescents. We predicted that *suzhi* would be positively correlated with adolescents' SCC and SSS (Hypothesis 1). We also predicted that SCC and SSS would be negatively correlated with adolescents' SA (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we predicted that SCC and SSS would mediate the association between *suzhi* and SA (Hypothesis 3).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 614 young adolescent students recruited from one middle school that includes junior and senior middle school students in

Southwest China. Participants were aged 15.49 ± 1.76 years (range: 12–19). Junior and senior middle school students comprised 253 and 361 participants, respectively. Boys and girls comprised 248 and 315 participants, respectively, with 51 participants reporting no gender. Participants were all of Han ethnicity.

This study was approved by the ethics committee for psychological research at the author's institution. Written consent was first obtained from the heads of school and parents. Willing participants subsequently provided spoken consent. Participants completed a self-report questionnaire in a 40-minute class at school under the guidance of trained researchers. The researchers then collected the completed questionnaires.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Psychological *suzhi*

Following previous research, we used the simplified version of the Psychological *Suzhi* Questionnaire for Adolescents (PSQAS) to measure *suzhi* (Feng & Zhang, 2001; Feng, Zhang, & Fan, 2004). The PSQAS was developed and validated based on a bi-factor model (Reise, Scheines, Widaman, & Haviland, 2013); each dimension is independent and contributes to overall *suzhi*. This scale is suitable for use with adolescents in the Chinese school environment and contains 24 items examining the following dimensions of *suzhi*: cognitive quality, individuality, and adaptability (example items from each dimension: *I am interested in new knowledge*, *I can solve problems independently*, and *I am a popular person*, respectively). Responses use a five-point Likert scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 5 = *totally agree*). Scores range from 24 to 120. Higher scores indicate greater *suzhi*. Research testing the PSQAS in a large sample in Southwest China ($N = 2549$) supported a three-factor structure and found good internal consistency for the total score (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$) and acceptable internal consistency for subscale scores ($\alpha > 0.76$). In the present study, internal reliability was $\alpha = 0.94$ for the total scale and ranged from 0.83 to 0.87 for the subscales.

2.2.2. Self-concept clarity

We examined SCC using the revised version of Self-concept Clarity Scale (SCCS; Campbell et al., 1996; translated into Chinese by Gu, 2014). The SCCS contains 12 items organized on one dimension (example item: *My beliefs about myself seem to change very frequently*). Responses used a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Scores range from 12 to 84. Higher scores indicate greater SCC. The SCCS has shown high internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = 0.86$ among three samples) and good test-retest reliability ($\alpha = 0.79$ and 0.70 over four and five months, respectively; Campbell et al., 1996). The Chinese version of SCCS is reliable among adolescents in China ($\alpha = 0.78$; Gu, 2014). In the present study, the SCCS' internal reliability was 0.83 for the total scale.

2.2.3. Subjective social status

We examined SSS using the Subjective Social Status Questionnaire for College Students (SSQC; Cheng, Zhang, Guan, & Chen, 2015). The SSQC contains seven items examining the following topics: academic achievement, family conditions, popularity, social practice ability, talent level, emotional state, and figure temperament. The SSQC uses a 10-rung "ladder" to measure SSS: for each item, participants indicate their position on the ladder. Higher positions indicate greater SSS. For scoring, each rung of the ladder was assigned a numerical value corresponding to its height (i.e., the highest and lowest rungs were coded as 10 and 1, respectively). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated that all items of the SSQC examine a common dimension (Chen, Cheng, Guan, & Zhang, 2014). In the present study, CFA indicated that the SSQC was suitable for use in our sample ($\chi^2/df = 6.21$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.03) and the SSQC showed good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.84$ for the total questionnaire).

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