



Research Paper: Predicting Social Anxiety in Schoolgirls Based on Parenting Styles and Mothers Cognitive Flexibility



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Abstract

Based on research evidence, parenting styles and cognitive factors in mothers may be effective in shaping and exacerbating children's social anxiety. The aim of the present study is to determine the social anxiety of schoolgirls based on parenting styles and cognitive flexibility of their mothers. For this descriptive study, a correlational design is used. The participants of the study include all students in sixth grade elementary school and their mothers in the city of Khomem in the academic year of 2019-2020. The number of participants is 200 sixth grade elementary school students selected based on convenience sampling. Liebowitz Children and Adolescents Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS-CA), Baumrind Parenting Styles Scale and Cognitive Flexibility Scale (CFS) are employed to collect data. The statistical data are analyzed based on Pearson correlation coefficient and multiple regression analysis. The results of multiple regression analysis reveal that parenting styles and cognitive flexibility predict 64.1% of the variance of students' social anxiety. These findings suggest that parenting styles and cognitive flexibility play a crucial role in the pathology and prevention of students' social anxiety.

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1. Introduction

Anxiety disorders are one of the psychological problems in children and adolescents that have a great impact on their psychological status and social relationships. In 7% (American Psychological Association, 2015) of cases, these disorders including social anxiety disorders (Alkozi, Cooper, Greswell, 2014), have had a 12-month prevalence in children and adolescents. According to DSM-5, social anxiety disorder refers to an overt and persistent fear of social or performance situations in which one can believe that he or she would act in a shameful or humiliating manner in that situation. In social actions or intimidating practices, individuals are concerned about their choices since other people may perceive them as anxious, helpless, confused, and perplexed (Ryngold, Herber & Franklin, 2003).

Mother-child interaction is one of the most important and influential factors in the formation of social anxiety disorder in children. Many studies have demonstrated that mothers of the children with problems, would experience limitations compared to the parents of normal children, and their performance might be more likely to result in anxiety disorders in children (Ganji, 2013). The child's temperament and characteristics affect the quality and quantity of care provided to him/her, and thus the mother's way of repair also affects the child's characteristics and growth as well as abnormal characteristics. Mother-child interactions are the mother-parenting style that even occurs during the mother-child interaction (Khanjani, Peymania & Hashemi, 2016).

One of the factors that can have effect on students' social anxiety is parenting patterns and parenting styles. One of the most important approaches in the field of parenting is proposed by Baumrind (1991). He (ibid) identifies three parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Findings of Rezvani shakib, Okati, Asgari, Sadeghi (2018), and Yazdani and Daryayi (2016) demonstrate that choosing the right parenting style reduces the level of social anxiety in children. In addition, Yazdani and Daryayi (2016), Farrokhjasteh and Allahyari (2014) report that children of the powerful parents have high self-confidence and can participate in social situations more easily. Evidence has shown that parenting styles affect children's social anxiety (Chen, Liu, Lu, & Ren, 2020; Salza, Guisti, Asurio, Kazakia, & Roncon, 2020; Alkozi et al, 2014)

Another variable related to children's social anxiety is their mothers' cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility is an ability to adapt to one's thinking and behavior in response to changes in environmental conditions (Dixton, Nelson, & McClure, 2007). This structure has been considered to be a potential mechanism associated with anxiety disorders; the higher the level of cognitive flexibility, the lower the level of anxiety in individuals would be (Fazeli, Ehteshamzadeh & Hashemi, 2015). Social anxiety disorder is perpetuated by cognitive content and style, including the inability to adapt to or to encounter unexpected situations flexibly (Himberg, 2016); additionally, parents' cognitive vulnerabilities act as a potential risk factor for their children's symptoms of anxiety (Riskind, 2017). One study has found that mothers with anxious children would

become more involved in psychological inhibition behavior designed to manipulate the child's emotional state; they would show less maturity in discussing a negative emotional event. (Bromario & Carnes, 2015). In this regard, the findings of Sepahvand (2019), Moghaddampour and Sepahvand (2018) indicate that there is a significant difference between normal children and people with social anxiety in terms of understanding the full complexity of issues and the ability of social skills. Furthermore, Kheirmand Kavari and Behzadipour (2015) find that mothers' cognitive flexibility plays a crucial role in children's social anxiety. Evidence reveals that cognitive factors affect children's social anxiety (Sepahvand et al., 2019).

Accordingly, there is additional evidence about the existence of a relationship between parenting styles and mothers' cognitive flexibility with children's social anxiety. Therefore, since no studies have been carried out on this kind of disorder, the present study is a step towards its better identification. Besides, the correct and timely diagnosis of this disorder to prevent its destructive effects from jeopardizing the psychological, social, individual and family life of individuals, is very important. Therefore, the present study aims to predict children's social anxiety based on parenting styles and mothers' cognitive flexibility.

2. Method

The correlation scheme was used in this research. The participants of the present study included all sixth-grade students at Khomam primary school in the academic year 2019-20 (N = 250). The sample was

200 students selected out of all sixth-grade students of the city of Khomem. According to Morgan's table, 148 participants were considered to be the appropriate number. However, 200 students were selected based on convenience sampling method due to the possibility of deficiencies in completing the questionnaires and increasing the external credibility.

The research tools are as follows:

Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale for Children and Adolescents: This 24-item scale was developed by Masis-Warner et al., (2003, cited by Hasani, Fayazi & Akbari, 2017). The participants answered the questions of this scale on a four-point Likert scale (from 1 to 4 basis). Cronbach's coefficient values as (0.82 to 0.95) indicated that the internal consistency of the Persian version of this scale and its subscales were satisfactory. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis supported the four-factor structure (anxiety and avoidance of social interactions as well as anxiety and avoidance of social performance) of the questionnaire. Mean and correlation coefficients were calculated between the Persian version scales of Liebowitz (1987) Social Anxiety Questionnaire and Beck Depression Inventory; the results showed that the correlation coefficients between the subscales were significant and high which could be due to the coexistence of these two disorders. Moreover, to evaluate the validity, this scale was correlated with Connor social phobia scale, the correlation coefficient of which between the two scales was 0.60 ($P < 0.01$).

Baumrind Parenting Styles Scale: This 30-items scale was designed and built

by Baumrind (1973). Baumrind introduced the parenting style as the controlling function of parents which is divided into authoritarian, authoritative and permissive styles. On this scale, each item is rated as "strongly disagree, disagree, hesitant, agree, and strongly agree" on a scale of 1 to 5, respectively. Minai and Nikzad, (2017) conducted a study on students' mothers using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and obtained these subscales' values ranging from 0.62 to 0.77. Besides, three factors were obtained through the analysis of exploratory factors which could explain 30.5% of the total variance.

Dennis and Vanderwal Cognitive Flexibility Scale: This was a 20-item scale developed and used by Dennis and Vanderwall (2010). The items of this questionnaire should be scored on a 7-point Likert scale (from 0 to 6). The concurrent validity of this questionnaire with Beck Depression Inventory as well as Martin and Robin flexibility were -0.39 and 0.75, respectively ($p < 0.01$). In addition, the reliability coefficient of Cronbach's alpha method was 0.91. Shareh et al. (as cited in Shareh, Farmani & Soltani, 2014) obtained the validity of the whole scale and the reliability coefficient through the Cronbach method which was equal to 0.71 and 0.90, respectively. Kohandani and Abu al-Ma'ali (2017) reported the homogeneity coefficient of this questionnaire calculated as 0.89. Moreover, the correlation coefficient of this questionnaire with Beck Depression Inventory was obtained as -0.67 ($p < 0.01$).

To collect data, the number of schools and female students studying in the sixth grade of primary school in the academic year of 1998-99 was first calculated in

Khomam region. Then, 10 out of 13 schools in the city of Khomam were selected. The chosen students were primary school girls, a list of whom was prepared with the cooperation of teachers; about 20 students were selected from each class. The questionnaire was sent online to 210 students along with their mothers; also, the necessary explanations were given and the ambiguities that each student had about the questions were resolved. Respondents followed the online questionnaire's link. At first, they filled in the required information and sent back the questionnaires according to the given explanations. A total of 200 students were selected and surveyed according to the available completed questionnaires after removing the heterogeneous scores. For analyzing the data, Pearson correlation coefficient and multiple regression analysis with input method were employed.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics consist of mean and standard deviation related to students' age, mothers' employment status, education and students' birth order. Regarding the mean of the age of students 108 participants (52.7%), were 12 and 92 (44.9%) were 13 years old. The standard deviation and mean of the students' age were 12.42 and 0.78, respectively. Considering education, 52 mothers (25.4%) had lower secondary education or even lower than that and 19 mothers (9.3%) had upper secondary education and 108 mothers (52.7%) had diploma and AA degree and 21 mothers (10.3%) had undergraduate and graduate degrees. 68 mothers (33.2%) were employed and 132 (64.4%) were housewives. 123 participants (60%) were

the first child and 65 participants (31.7%) were the second child and 12 participants (5.9%) were the third child. **Table 1** displays descriptive statistics concerning

Table 1

Descriptive indicators of students' social anxiety and parenting styles and mothers' cognitive flexibility

	Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Social anxiety	Performance anxiety	28.23	10.43	16	49	0.63	-0.26
	Social status anxiety	24.29	9.30	13	43	0.60	-0.30
	Total	52.57	19.50	31	92	0.62	-0.31
Parenting styles	Permissive	23.46	11.88	10	50	10.27	0.33
	Authoritarian	22.64	10.43	11	49	0.50	1.08
	Authoritative	40.98	7.80	16	50	-0.81	0.40
Cognitive flexibility	Perception	50.80	16.23	18	69	-0.65	-0.28
	Controllability	46.05	15.29	17	62	-0.74	-0.28
	Behavior justification	10.03	3.69	2	14	-0.67	-0.13
	Total	106.88	34.71	42	142	-0.70	-0.33

The distribution of scores is normal according to the values of skewness and kurtosis tabulated in **Table 1**, which is less

students' social anxiety variables and parenting styles and mothers' cognitive flexibility.

than $\pm 1\%$.

Table 2 illustrates the correlation matrix of the studied components.

Table 2

The correlation coefficients between the studied variables

	Permissive	Authoritarian	Authoritative	Cognitive flexibility	Social anxiety
Permissive	-				
Authoritarian	-0.40**	-			
Authoritative	-0.38**	-0.44**	-		
Cognitive flexibility	-0.54**	-0.32**	0.80**	-	
Social anxiety	0.24*	-0.59**	-0.67**	-0.66**	-

As shown in **Table 2**, the relationship between all variables were significant at the 0.01 level.

Considering the assumption of error independence (DW = 1.80), the assumption of regression linearity (P = 0.0001, F =

Table 3

117.26) and multiple alignment, the use of parametric statistics was permissible.

Table 3 reveals the results of multiple regression analysis to predict social anxiety based on parenting styles in students.

The results of multiple regression analysis for predicting social anxiety based on parenting styles in students

Predictor variable	B	SE	Beta	T	Sig	Tolerance	VIF
Fixed value	29.83	10.73		2.78	0.006		
Permissive	0.70	0.10	0.426	6.70	0.0001	0.451	2.22
Authoritarian	1.26	0.12	0.671	10.26	0.0001	0.43	2.34
Rational authoritative	-0.54	0.16	-0.217	-3.35	0.0001	0.44	2.28
R= 0.802		R ² = 0.638		F=117.26	P= < 0.01		

Based on [Table 3](#), 63.8% of the social anxiety variance was explained by predictor variables. Therefore, the values of authoritarian parenting styles ($\beta = 0.671$), permissive ($\beta = 0.426$) and rational authoritative ($\beta = 0.217$) could predict changes related to social anxiety ($P < 0.01$).

Considering the assumption of error independence (DW = 1.98), the

Table 4

The results of multiple regression analysis for predicting social anxiety based on cognitive flexibility components in mothers

Predictor variable	B	SE	Beta	T	Sig	Tolerance	VIF
Fixed value	93.58	3.48		26.90	0.0001		
Perception	-0.84	0.28	-0.696	-3.01	0.003	0.05	18.64
Controllability	-0.19	0.27	-0.145	-0.70	0.49	0.07	15.11
Behavior justification	0.99	0.80	0.188	1.24	0.22	0.12	8.06
R= 0.664		R ² =0.433		F= 51.39	P= <0.01		

Based on [Table 4](#), 43.3% of the social anxiety variance was explained by predictor variables. Considering the beta values of the perception component ($\beta = -0.696$), it could predict the changes related to social anxiety ($P < 0.01$). Regarding the assumption of error independence (DW = 2.27), the assumption of linear regression ($P = 0.0001$, $F = 82.08$) and multiple alignment, the use of parametric statistics was permissible.

assumption of regression linearity ($P = 0.0001$, $F = 51.39$) and multiple alignment, the use of parametric statistics was permissible.

The results of multiple regression analysis for predicting social anxiety based on cognitive flexibility components in mothers are presented in [Table 4](#).

4. Discussion

The present study aimed at predicting the social anxiety of schoolgirls based on parenting styles and mothers' cognitive flexibility. The results of multiple regression analysis indicated that authoritarian, permissive and rational authoritative parenting styles could explain 63.8% of the variance of students' social anxiety and authoritarian parenting style had the most effective role in explaining the social anxiety of female students. The

findings of the present study lend support to previous findings in the literature (Rezvani Shakib, 2018; Farrokhjasteh & Allahyari, 2014; Bandelow et al., 2010). The current study does not support previous research in this area. In fact, these findings refute Ghasemipour Kordmahaleh and Bazazian's (2013) results.

Therefore, authoritarian parenting style is characterized by high parental demands and low responses. These parents do not see the need to give reasons for their orders and put emphasis on the unquestioning obedience and respect of their children. Decreased self-esteem, independence and creativity, and delays in moral development are characteristics of children in authoritarian families. Accordingly, the use of these methods in the family would increase social anxiety in students. Baumrind (1971) stated that permissive parents had low expectations of their children and they had no control over them. Permissive style had a characteristic of negligence that included the presentation of small demands for things with very few restrictions on the children. Permissive parents had no control over their children, and these children showed the least level of self-confidence, curiosity, and self-control in each group, with having difficulty in controlling impulse and distinguishing right from wrong. In permissive style, children shirk responsibility and are demanding. In this educational model, children are raised to be lazy, weak-minded and dependent; moreover, the child is emotionally nurtured and because they cannot handle problems, they are prone to social anxiety and negative emotions. Children of authoritative (warm and controlling) parents are loved by their

parents and have many opportunities to make decisions, choices and feel independent because of the support they receive from their parents, since a certain level of trust connects them. The children of these parents have more self-confidence and less social anxiety; they can also participate in social situations more easily. Expectations that commensurate with children's abilities along with a reasonable level of love increases children's perseverance and self-efficacy (Heibati, 2002).

In addition, the results of multiple regression analysis revealed that among the three components of cognitive flexibility, the perception component explained 43.3% of the variance of the students' social anxiety; the perception component had the most crucial role in explaining the social anxiety of female students. This concurs well with Sepahvand (2019) and also confirms other findings (Kheirmand Kavari & Behzadipour, 2018; Moghaddampour, 2018; Rosa-Alcázar et al., 2020).

Based on the relationship between children's social anxiety and mothers' cognitive flexibility, the mothers with low cognitive flexibility had children with high social anxiety. According to the theory of cognitive flexibility, an individual could easily reorganize and use information in response to a variety of situational demands. To gain this cognitive flexibility, individuals should understand the full complexity of problems and frequently examine the problem space to see how changes in variables and goals can change the space (Shareh et al., 2014). Mothers with low cognitive flexibility in stressful situations could not control their thoughts; therefore, the children could suffer from

psychological damage, including social anxiety, by imitating them. These children become anxious in social situations and would have low social skills. However, mothers with high cognitive flexibility in uncomfortable situations teach their children to control emotions and handle the difficult situations with their management skills (Razmi, 2004).

Additionally, the results of multiple regression analysis demonstrated that authoritarian, permissive and cognitive flexibility parenting styles determined 63.4% of the social anxiety variance among female students among which authoritarian parenting style had the most influential role in explaining the social anxiety of female students. This is consistent with Chen, Liu, Luo and Ren (2020), Salza et al. (2020) as well as Alokzai et al. (2014). Accordingly, parenting styles and cognitive flexibility of mothers were predictors of their children's social anxiety. What is important is that given the impact of parenting style on social adjustment, parents need to voluntarily choose the most appropriate parenting style. However, the most appropriate parenting style might be a function of social, cultural, economic and scientific conditions. Now a days, according to the contemporary culture of society and the situation of families, the most appropriate parenting style is the logical authoritative style, which is being decisive and provide reassurance for the children; that is to say, demonstrating genuine love and reassurance with establishing control and not the unconditional love for children. Both authoritarian and permissive styles have a negative effect on nurturing the children, while authoritative style would ensure the

children's success. This can be explained by the fact that the mother's low cognitive and behavioral flexibility and her resorting to strict behavioral controls can possibly affect children's sense of competence and their coping skills which results in increasing their anxiety. Maternal hyperactivity reduces a child's mastery and competence and decreases children's chances of acquiring appropriate developmental skills and perceived competence.

5. Conclusion

According to the results obtained, parenting styles and cognitive flexibility of mothers were the predictors of children's social anxiety. As a result, due to the impact of parenting style on children's social adjustment, parents should choose the most appropriate parenting style according to the contemporary cultural status and family conditions and increase their cognitive flexibility.

One of the main limitations of this study was the impossibility of controlling the intervening variables such as social support and social, economic status, among others. Besides, just one questionnaire was used; the students might overestimate or underestimate their characteristics in answering the questions. Therefore, it is suggested that this issue should be further explored in future research given that the socio-economic status and attitudes of parents play an important role in the development of individuals' psychological characteristics. In addition, the self-report questionnaire and other sources such as interviewing and observing students and considering teachers' reports should be used to obtain information.

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Conflict of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any organization. Also, this research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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