

Relationship between Self-Esteem and Social Anxiety: Role of Social Connectedness as a Mediator

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The present study was designed to investigate the role of social connectedness as a mediator in relation between self-esteem and social anxiety. A purposive sample of 150 men and 150 women was drawn from Sargodha city. Urdu translated Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (Fatima, 2014), Urdu Translated Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (Shahid, 2012) and Urdu Translated Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Sardar, 1998), were used to measure social connectedness, social anxiety and self-esteem respectively. Results revealed that self-esteem positively and significantly predicted social connectedness and it significantly negatively predicted social anxiety. Mediation analysis demonstrated that the relationship between self-esteem and social anxiety was fully mediated by social connectedness. Results also revealed that self-esteem and social connectedness were high in women than men while level of social anxiety was found to be higher among men as compared to women. Implications of the research have been discussed.

Keywords: self-esteem, social anxiety, social connectedness, mediation

Self-esteem refers to views and values assigned to self, and includes individual's personal feelings toward self that result from awareness in making judgments on different aspects of the self (Stryker, 2002). These feelings and their assessments influence the reactions towards different aspects of life. Terror management theory proposes that self-esteem plays a vital role in reducing social anxiety because it performs a buffering role in the life of individuals (Loudin, Loukas, & Robinson, 2003; Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Orth, Robins, & Meier, 2009).

People with low self-esteem demonstrate lack of confidence, uncertainty, and experience negative feelings and maladjustment more frequently than people with higher self-esteem. Individuals with low self-esteem usually try to blame others for their failures rather than taking responsibility for their own actions (Tracy & Robins, 2003). Ultimately, this results in a tendency to avoid people, new settings and a general social disconnectedness leading to increased rates of social anxiety (Biemans, Halteren, Dijk, Rijkenberg, & Poortinga, 2008). It has been reported that people with low self-esteem are less friendly with reduced communications to other people making it possible to develop adequate and close relationships (e.g., family, friends and romantic relationships), and are emotionally less expressive, revealing less information about themselves (Cuming & Rapee, 2010). Social anxiety is a multidimensional construct, which can arise from discrepancies in others and one's own perception about themselves.

Studies show that social connectedness is strongly associated with the level of self-esteem (Ashida & Heaney, 2008). Twenge and Campbell (2002) reported a negative relation between social connectedness and levels of anxiety. Social networks and social ties have positive role in decreasing symptoms of emotional misery including depression and anxiety, by making individual more involved in their society (Williams & Galliher, 2006).

Relationships and associations with others leads one to a sense of being a valuable part of society and motivates them towards building communities, culture and work for the welfare of others (Capon & Blakely, 2007). Giordano and Lindstorm (2010) suggest that high level of social connectedness improves physical and psychological wellbeing. It leads to good relationships with others that provide social support and satisfaction, which ultimately decreases different types of psychological problems. Social connectedness is important for development; individuals feel supported with a sense of association and connectedness in their surroundings, which is one of the essential psychological need required for better psychological development and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Social connectedness is negatively linked with anxiety and shields impact of anxiety, as it creates confidence in individuals to deal with others and with social settings ultimately reducing their level of anxiety (Mashek, Stuewig, Furukawa & Tangney, 2006). It has been recognized that individuals with close social ties and close relations have protective buffer against anxiety (Stevenson & Zimmerman, 2005).

Lee, Dean and Jung (2008) proposed that social connectedness plays a significant role of mediator in the relationship between self-esteem and social anxiety. Research gives idea that people who are sociable and participate in community will probably take part in voluntary activities and help other people. Social disconnectedness create anxiety, individual's feels uneasiness in social settings and have a fear of judgment and evaluation. It makes them unable to move and work legitimately in their community.

According to Biemans et al. (2008), high self-esteem leads individuals to feel confident and as a result they can effectively deal with the all the type of situations, ultimately decreasing the chances of social anxiety. Self-esteem works as a sociometry that provides an individual with a sense of being loved and appreciated by people. Therefore, when they feel less valued they feel less socially connected, which leads to isolation, loneliness and social anxiety. Previously it is consistently proved that self-esteem and social connectedness help in decreasing different type of mental health problems (Dang, 2014; Foster et al., 2017; Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001).

Men and women differ in the way they value their self, and develop and shape relationships. Women compare themselves with others women more than men and this might reduce their level of self-esteem (Martinez & Dukes, 1991; Rapee & Spence, 2004; Sotelo, 2000). On similar lines, girls report larger fears, more separation anxiety, and elevated levels of generalized anxiety as compared to men (Angold, 2002). Women twice than men undergo depression and anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, and phobias (Kessler, 1994). Moller, Fouladi, MaCarthy and Hatch (2003) found women report higher levels of social connectedness than men. Women and girls were very likely to describe them as “connected self” including response to others on their own terms caring and interdependence (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

Study of Lee and Robins (1998) found that social connectedness is positively correlated with self-esteem and negatively correlated with anxiety. Moreover their findings revealed that same relationships were found among men and women. The present study aimed at exploring relationship between self-esteem and social anxiety and furthermore the mediating role of social connectedness.

In Pakistan, a large number of researches have been directed on aforementioned variables i.e., role of self-esteem in producing social anxiety in adolescents (Bano, et al., 2013), self-esteem of students and their perception of teacher behaviour (Ismail & Majeed, 2011), relationship of low self-esteem deficits with tendency to suicide (Rizwan, 2010), level of anxiety in high school students (Deb, Chatterjee, & Walsh, 2010). However, these variables are not studied in combination. Also studies on self-esteem, social anxiety and social connectedness have been conducted (Bano & Ahmad, 2013; Ismail & Majeed, 2011; Rizwan, 2010), however all previous studies explored only direct effect of variables on the social anxiety but not an indirect effect. Keeping this in view the present research aims to investigate these variables in combination and relationship between them.

The present study aimed at assessing the relationship among self-esteem, social connectedness and social anxiety. Its salient goal is to examine the mediating role of social connectedness in relationship between self-esteem and social anxiety. The selection of mediator was made on the basis of literature which provides evidence for covariates of relationship between variables of present study. This model was already explored by Lee, Dean and Jung (2008) but current study helped in getting idea about the relationship of these variables regarding Pakistani population who have a different cultural context.

Objectives

These objectives are based on the review of literature and are briefly phrased as follows:

1. To assess the relationship between self-esteem, social connectedness and social anxiety.
2. To find out the mediating role of social connectedness in predicting social anxiety on the basis of self-esteem and social anxiety.
3. To measure gender differences in all variables of the study.

Hypotheses

Based on literature above (e.g. Biemans et al., 2008; Lee, Dean & Jung, 2008) we hypothesize that self-esteem would significantly negatively predict social anxiety and social connectedness

significantly and negatively predict social anxiety. In other words, part of social anxiety would be mediated and explained by social connectedness. Self-esteem would significantly positively predict of social connectedness. On the basis of literature (Angold, 2002; Martinez & Dukes, 1991; Rapee & Spence, 2004) it is hypothesized that there would be significant gender differences in the variables of current study.

Methodology

Sample

A convenient sample comprised of 150 men & 150 women taken from Sargodha city. Married and unmarried participants both were given equal representation in the sample. All men were professionals and were working in public and private sector; while working ($n=50$) and non-working ($n=100$) both were given representation. Age of the participants ranged from 22 to 55 years ($M=38.00$, $SD=7.10$) and had a minimum of eight years of school education.

Instruments

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). Urdu version of Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Sardar, 1998) was used to measure levels of self-esteem in the participants. The scale comprised 10-items having 4-point Likert-type scale i.e., “1=strongly agree “4=strongly disagree”. The item no 1, 2, 4, 6, 7 are positive items and 3, 5, 8, 9, 10 are reversely scored items. Scale demonstrated good reliability and validity. Indices of test-re-test reliability ranged from .82 to .88 and reported range of Cronbach’s alpha is .77 to .88 (Rosenberg, 1965). Internal consistency of Urdu translated scale was .86 (Sardar, 1998)

Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R). Social connectedness was measured by Urdu version of SCS-R (Fatima, 2014). The scale comprised of 20 items using a 6-point Likert-type scale in which response format is from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree. Scores range from 20 to 120. The reported reliability coefficient of SCS-R is .94 (Lee, 2001). Reliability of Urdu translated version was .89 (Fatima, 2014)

Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS). Liebowitz (1987) designed LSAS with 24-items. In the current study Urdu version of LSAS was used (Shahid, 2012). It is commonly used as self-report measure of social anxiety; it contains items depicting different social situations. For each situation individual rates their level of anxiety. Items are divided into two subscales: Social Interaction and Performance Situation. The overall score is calculated by summing the scores on six subscales (total fear, total avoidance, and fear of social situations, fear of performance situations, avoidance of social situations and avoidance of performance situations). Alpha reliability for LSAS total score was reported to be .96 and the reliability of the Urdu version was alpha = .87.

Procedure

In order to collect the data participants were contacted at various places for instance, their residence, and workplace etc. They were briefed about the main purpose of study. After taking their informed consent questionnaires were given to the willing participants. All the queries regarding questionnaire and research purpose were are

solved and they were requested for accurate response. Confidentiality of the obtained data was ensured to the participants.

Results

In order to test the hypotheses of current study analysis was carried out through SPSS. Hierarchical regression analysis was used to test mediation and t-test was applied to test the hypothesis regarding gender based differences in all variables.

Table 1
Descriptive, Psychometric Properties and Inter Scale Correlations of Variables (N = 300)

| Variable | 2 | 3 | M(SD) | α |
|----------|-------|--------|--------------|----------|
| 1 SE | .57** | -.52** | 24.27(4.14) | .70 |
| 2 SC | - | -.85** | 65.74(21.95) | .96 |
| 3 SA | - | - | 35.17(16.94) | .96 |

Note. SE = self-esteem; SC = social connectedness; SA = social anxiety. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means. ** $p < .01$

Table 1 shows satisfactory index of mean, standard deviation, alpha reliability coefficient and correlation for all the constructs used in the current study. Table 1 shows that self-esteem and social connectedness are positively correlated, while both are negatively correlated with social anxiety.

Table 2
Predictors of Social Anxiety (N = 300)

| Predictor Variables | B | SEB | β | R ² |
|---------------------|-------|-----|---------|----------------|
| SE | -2.12 | .20 | -.52*** | .27*** |
| SC | -.65 | .02 | -.85*** | .72*** |

Note. SE = self-esteem; SC = social connectedness *** $p < .001$

In Table 2 simple linear regression suggested that self-esteem negatively predicts social anxiety ($\beta = -.52, t = -10.47, p < .001$) and explained 27% variance in social anxiety ($R^2 = .27, F(1, 298) = 109.59, p < .001$), while social connectedness also negatively predicts social anxiety ($\beta = -.85, t = -27.49, p < .001$) and explained 72 % variance in it ($R^2 = .72, F(1, 298) = 755.86, p < .001$).

Table 3
Self Esteem as a Predictor of Social Connectedness (N = 300)

| Predictor Variables | B | SEB | β | R ² |
|---------------------|------|-----|---------|----------------|
| SE | 3.01 | .25 | .57*** | .32*** |

Note. SE = self-esteem *** $p < .001$

Table 5
Gender Differences on Study Variables (N=300)

| Variables | Men(n = 150) | Women(n = 150) | t(298) | LL | UL | Cohen's d |
|-----------|------------------|------------------|--------|-------|--------|-----------|
| SE | 23.00 (3.10) | 25.00 (4.70) | 4.00* | -2.80 | -.97 | 0.5 |
| SC | 47.00 (10.00) | 83.00 (15.00) | 24.00* | -.38 | -32.00 | 2.8 |
| SA | 49.00 (10.00) | 21.00 (7.00) | 26.00* | 26.00 | 30.00 | 3.2 |

Note. SE = self-esteem; SC = social connectedness; SA = social anxiety. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means. * $p < .001$

Table 3 indicates that self-esteem positively predicts social connectedness ($\beta = .57, t = 11.89, p < .001$) and explains 32% variance in social connectedness ($R^2 = .32, F(1, 298) = 141.4, p < .001$).

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression for Social Connectedness, Mediating the Relationship between Self-Esteem and Social Anxiety (N=300).

| Predictors | ΔR^2 | β |
|----------------------|--------------|---------|
| Step I | .27*** | |
| Self-Esteem | | -.52*** |
| Step II | .45*** | |
| Self-Esteem | | -.06 |
| Social Connectedness | | -.82*** |
| Total R ² | .72*** | |

*** $p < .001$

Table 4 illustrates mediating impact of social connectedness between the relationship of self-esteem and social anxiety. For mediation three conditions must be fulfilled. The first condition is that self-esteem is showing significant negative prediction of social anxiety ($\beta = -.52, t = -10.47, p < .001$), ($F(1, 298) = 109.59, p < .001$) with 27% variance in social anxiety ($R^2 = .27$). Second condition is tested in which social connectedness is significantly predicting social anxiety in negative direction ($\beta = -.85, t = -27.49, p < .001$), ($F(1, 298) = 755.86, p < .001$). This model explains 72% variance in social anxiety ($R^2 = .72$). Last condition is the prediction of social connectedness by self-esteem which is also found positively significant ($\beta = .57, t = 11.89, p < .001$), ($F(1, 298) = 144.10, p < .001$) with 32% variance in social anxiety ($R^2 = .32$).

The final indication of mediation is clear as self-esteem which is significant predictor of social anxiety ($\beta = -.52, t = -10.47, p < .001$) becomes non-significant predictor of social anxiety ($\beta = -.06, t = -1.51, p > .05$) when social connectedness was entered into the model. Thus, findings indicate that social connectedness ($\beta = -.82, t = -21.84, p < .001$) fully mediates the relationship among self-esteem and social anxiety at ($\Delta R^2 = .45, F(1, 297) = 476.78, p < .001$). This mediational model is further determined on the basis of Sobel's test (1986) for finding the significance of mediation which proved to be significant with 55.1% variance in social anxiety described by self-esteem is attributable to the mediational effect of social connectedness. The hypothesis is supported that social connectedness is mediating the relationship among self-esteem and social anxiety and indirectly predicting social anxiety (Sobel's $Z = -10.901, p < .001$). The figure presented below represents the mediation analysis with its significant path coefficients.

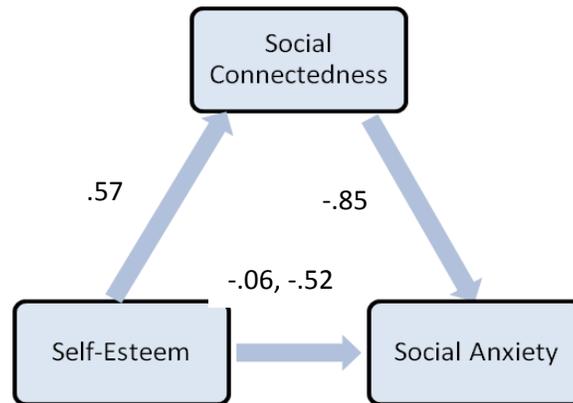


Figure 1. Social connectedness mediating the relationship between self-esteem and social anxiety.

Table 5 portrays significant gender differences in self-esteem, social connectedness and social anxiety. Furthermore, the values of Mean and SD of women and men are reflecting that level of self-esteem and social connectedness is high in women than men. The table also showed high level of social anxiety in men as compared to women.

Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed that self-esteem negatively (significantly) predicted social anxiety (See Table 3) and supported the first hypothesis that self-esteem provides a buffer against anxiety (Crocker & Park, 2004; Pyszczynski et al., 2004). Results also supported the second hypothesis that self-esteem significantly positively predicted social connectedness (See Table 4). The results are consistent with previous findings on the inter-relationship between the variables, as Lasgaard and Elklit (2009) reported low self-esteem people try to be socially isolated and experience diminished social connections and support. Also social groups and social ties have a positive effect on psychological wellbeing decreasing the anxiety, mental health issues, and other signs of emotional misery (Donald, Dower, Correa-Velez & Jones, 2006).

The present study revealed social connectedness fully mediated self-esteem and social anxiety. These results are in line with the results of study conducted by William and Gallaher (2006), as their findings revealed that social connectedness play an important role in connecting self-esteem with mental health of participants. Similarly, previously it was maintained that social connectedness is positively linked with self-esteem and negatively related to social anxiety (Lee, Dean & Jung, 2008). Similarly other studies reported that social connectedness improved self-esteem (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003), reducing levels of social anxiety (Ashida & Heaney, 2008). In contrast, low level of social connectedness, has multiple negative outcomes for example, higher level of social isolation, lead to greater signs of social anxiety and lower level of self-esteem, in contrast to individuals with larger social networks (Kim & Subramanian, 2006). People who are more involved in their community services, interact with others have positive impact on their personalities. Social involvement decreases their level of social anxiety and also enhances their self-esteem (Mitchell & LaGory, 2002). Yousaf and Li (2015) conducted a research on Pakistani sample and reported that people in this culture had a keen desire to belong to others in order to evaluate them favourably. This

tendency can be driving force for increasing self-esteem and decreasing self-anxiety.

Results of the present study revealed significant gender differences in social connectedness, social anxiety and self-esteem. These findings are supported by pertinent literature (Sprecher, Brooks, & Avogo, 2013). Bosak, Neff, and Schyns, (2004) reported that men valued high self-esteem in each and every life matters such as achievement and job satisfaction as compared to women. Keller, Meier, Gross and Semmer (2013) suggested that self-esteem enable people to use a variety of skills and attribute accomplishments to them. Men are generally considered dominating and achievement-oriented as compared to women, who are nurturing and socially sensitive, and are caring with kind attributes. These attributes make them socially connected more than men (Sczesny, Bosak, Neff, & Schyns, 2004). Similarly, Moller, Fouladi, MaCarthy and Hatch (2003) suggested that women reported higher levels of social connectedness than men because they have sharing nature so have more friends than men. On the other hand Azher, Khan, and Salim (2014) reported high level of social anxiety in men than women.

Conclusions, Limitation and Implications

Since the study is based on a correlational design, so causal connection among study variables cannot not be assumed. In future research, true experimental research design should be utilized to study causal relationships between these variables. As the measures used in the current study were self- report, so it might cause social desirability so it is suggested for future researchers to add some measure of social desirability to control this element.

The present study has several implications for research and practice. The present study clarified the role of social connectedness in relation between self-esteem and social anxiety. These findings can help counsellors and psychologists, dealing with socially anxious people in various fields of life. They can design various interventions or strategies to enhance self-esteem by guiding people to improve their social involvement, and enable people to ultimately cope with social anxiety.

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