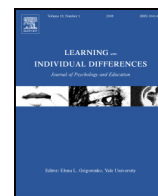




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Test anxiety among female college students and its relation to perceived parental academic expectations and differentiation of self

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ABSTRACT

Test anxiety has become a serious problem in modern society (e.g., Peleg, 2004). Studies have found it to be associated with parenting and family patterns (e.g., Peleg et al., 2003) and specifically with differentiation of self (Peleg, 2004; Peleg et al., 2003). Additional studies reported that parents' academic expectations may play a particularly important role in offspring's test anxiety (e.g., Fox, Henderson, Marshall, Nichols, & Ghera, 2005; Peleg-Popko & Klingman, 2002). The purpose of the present study was to assess the relationships between differentiation of self, perceptions of parents' academic expectations and test anxiety among college students. Specifically we examined whether the correlation between differentiation of self (exogenous variable) and test anxiety (endogenous variable) was mediated by perceived parental academic expectations. Participants were 392 female college students (ages 19–36, mean age 23.6, SD = 2.8). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using the AMOS program (Arbuckle, 2007) to test this mediation effect with respect to all subscales. Results showed that students' perceptions of their parents' academic expectations served as a partial mediator between fusion with others (differentiation of self subscale) and emotionality (test anxiety subscale) and between emotional cutoff (differentiation of self subscale) and worry (test anxiety subscale). Students with higher levels of fusion with others or emotional cutoff reported higher perceived parental academic expectations and higher levels of test anxiety. Teachers and school counselors can use the results to create profiles that will help identify which students are likely to develop excessive test anxiety.

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1. Introduction

Test anxiety has become a key problem in modern society because of the ongoing importance of tests as part of assessments in education, and because potential advancement in society frequently depends on test performance (e.g., Peleg, 2004). Between 11% and 30% of students in school report that they suffer from test anxiety (Segool, 2010; Weiner & Carton, 2012). One of the main issues that school counselors deal with is students' test anxiety and test performance (Peleg, 2004). Part of their work is to identify those students who are liable to develop excessive test anxiety and to help them reduce their anxiety and improve their performance on tests.

It has been suggested that what underlies test anxiety is the student's personality structure, shaped by experiences with his/her parents and by the nature of caregiving relationships during childhood (Peleg, 2004). Indeed, a series of studies has found test anxiety to be correlated with parenting and family patterns – specifically, with

differentiation of self and family differentiation (Peleg, 2004; Peleg, Klingman, & Abu-Hana Nahhas, 2003). In addition, parents' academic expectations were found to correlate with the achievement of their children (Naumann, Guillaume, & Funder, 2012), suggesting a likely association between children's anxiety and family and cultural patterns (Oishi & Sullivan, 2005). It has been argued that excessive parental control, pressure and academic expectations may play a particularly important role in children's anxiety disorders, whether as a cause of the anxiety, as a parental response to the child's anxiety, or as an expression of the parents' own anxiety (e.g., Fox, Marshall, Nichols, & Ghera, 2005; Peleg-Popko & Klingman, 2002). However, the question of whether perceived parental academic expectations mediate a correlation between differentiation of self and test anxiety has not yet been addressed. The objective of the present research was to examine a model in which such perceived expectations might be seen to mediate the association between test anxiety and differentiation of self among female college students.

1.1. Differentiation of self (the exogenous variable)

Differentiation of self is an important aspect of personality in regard to both mental health and normal development (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

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An indicator of an individual's level of emotional maturity (Meteyard, Andersen, & Marx, 2012; Peleg, 2011), it manifests on two levels (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). On the interpersonal level, it is defined as the ability of family members to function autonomously without emotional dependency on the family of origin, together with the ability to maintain close and intimate contact within significant relationships. On the intrapersonal level, it is reflected in the ability to both differentiate and maintain a balance between intellectual and emotional processes (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Skowron, 2011).

Differentiation of self includes four facets: emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff and fusion with others (Bowen, 1978). Less differentiated people tend to be emotionally reactive and overwhelmed by their strong feelings, finding it difficult to stay calm in stressful situations. They also have difficulty taking an I-position, i.e., owning their thoughts and feelings without a need to adapt to others' expectations. Further, when interpersonal experiences are too intense, poorly differentiated individuals feel the need to be alone and to disconnect (emotional cutoff). Finally, low-level differentiation leads to forming symbiotic relationships involving fusion with others.

Individuals with low differentiation of self find it difficult to think and function independently, and tend to develop dependency on others. As a result, they create excessive closeness in significant relationships and incessantly search for approval from significant others. In addition, a dependent pattern is liable to increase fear and dread of intimacy, which in turn may create patterns of emotional cutoff from significant others. In contrast, well-differentiated individuals are more independent, goal-directed and flexible; adhere more to their principles and beliefs; adapt more easily to changing situations; and are less emotionally dependent on others (Sahin, Nalbone, Wetchler, & Bercik, 2010).

Recent research has pointed to a negative correlation between differentiation of self and personal and relational expectations (McKinney & Renk, 2008), as well as between differentiation of self and expressions of anger, rage and aggression among family members (Pond et al., 2012). In addition, negative associations were found between differentiation of self and various kinds of anxieties, e.g., trait anxiety (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), separation anxiety (Peleg, Halaby, & Whaby, 2006, social anxiety (Peleg & Zoabi, 2014) and test anxiety (Peleg, 2004).

1.2. Test anxiety (the endogenous variable)

Test anxiety is one of the most draining factors in schools and other settings where testing is performed. It is a common and potentially serious problem among high school and college students (Peleg, 2009; Trifoni & Shahini, 2011). Test anxiety is defined as an unpleasant emotional reaction to an evaluative situation, and as a set of phenomenological, physiological and behavioral responses that accompany worry about possible undesirable consequences or failure on an exam or similar evaluative situation (Peleg, 2009). It is considered a situation-specific trait, which refers to anxiety states and worry cognitions that are experienced before, during and after examinations (Akca, 2011; Peleg, 2009; Peleg et al., 2003; Sarason & Sarason, 1990; Spielberger & Vagg, 1995; Weems et al., 2010). Students suffering from test anxiety do not feel confident about their abilities, and this is reflected in their performance and examination results (Peleg, 2009; Trifoni & Shahini, 2011). Those with high test anxiety levels report lower performance on tests and lower academic achievement (Putain, 2008; Segool, Carlson, Goforth, von der Embse, & Barterian, 2013).

Test anxiety interferes with learning and functioning in school, often beginning when children are first introduced into the education system (Segal & Shimony, 2000; Spielberger & Vagg, 1995) but typically increasing in high school (Peleg, 2009) and college (Trifoni & Shahini, 2011), when grades become a permanent part of student records and impact their educational and professional future (Aron, 2012). Examination of gender differences has revealed that girls typically have higher levels of test anxiety, mostly in the aspect of emotionality (Liebert &

Morris, 1967; Peleg et al., 2003; Trifoni & Shahini, 2011; Zaheri, Shahoei, & Zaheri, 2012). It has also been found that boys typically regard a testing situation as a challenge and, therefore, are less anxious, while girls tend to find testing situations threatening (Zaheri et al., 2012).

Theoretical models of anxiety disorders have emphasized the influence of parenting on the development, maintenance and amelioration of childhood anxiety and specifically test anxiety (e.g., Dadds & Roth, 2001; Vasey & Dadds, 2001). For example, young adolescents who reported strong attachment relations with parents also reported fewer feelings of depression and anxiety during the transition to junior high.

To understand students in a truly holistic sense, it is necessary to consider the general stresses in today's world. These include a host of day-to-day worries, concerns, hurts, misunderstandings and conflicts in relationships with peers and family (Bradley et al., 2007). In a series of studies, test anxiety was found to correlate with a number of family patterns. For example, a negative correlation was found between test anxiety, on the one hand, and differentiation of self (Peleg, 2004), family communication, family cohesion (Peleg, 2002a; Peleg, 2002b), and parental expectations (Peleg et al., 2003), on the other.

However, several reviews of the empirical evidence linking parenting to childhood anxiety have provided mixed support for existing theories (see McLeod, Wood, and Weisz (2007); Wood, McLeod, Sigman, Hwang, & Chu, 2003) and have failed to resolve a fundamental question: Are parenting practices noticeably related to childhood anxiety? In a meta-analysis investigating dimensions that may moderate the association between parenting and childhood anxiety, suggested that moderator variables, such as parental rejection (aversiveness, withdrawal and a lack of warmth) and control (e.g., over-involvement and a lack of autonomy granting), can be the source of inconsistent results across studies and can serve to mask the effects of other variables.

It was found that extreme parental control could play an important role in offspring's anxieties, either as a cause of anxiety, as a response by parents to the child's anxiety or as a manifestation of the parents' own anxiety (Fox et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2009). A negative association was found between levels of trait and test anxiety and family encouragement of personal growth, suggesting that parents who enable their child to encounter all sorts of experiences independently strengthen their ability to internalize a sense of trust imparted by the parents, and thus reinforce self-confidence and self-efficacy when coping with a variety of situations (Peleg-Popko & Klingman, 2002). It was suggested that less parental over-involvement could increase children's confidence and buffer against excessive anxiety, or, conversely, that very anxious children tend to elicit parental over-involvement and less autonomy support. When children exhibit elevated anxiety, parents may respond by making more decisions for them, reflecting over-controlling parenting behavior (Wood, McLeod, Piacentini, & Sigman, 2009). When parents fail to provide offspring with the opportunity to experience control in age-appropriate contexts, the latter may not develop a strong sense of self-efficacy, thereby increasing their sense of vulnerability to threat and heightening anxiety (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Wood et al., 2009).

A recent study examining the role of parental support in the relation between academic stress and the mental health of primary school children in Hong Kong found academic stress to be a risk factor that increased students' anxiety levels, and found parental emotional support to be a protective factor that contributed to better mental health among children (Leung, Yeung, & Wong, 2010). The researchers argued that the emphasis on educational achievements results in high demands and great pressure on children.

Parental support and parental pressure were also examined as possible mediators in the association between the potential gender-specific interplay of test anxiety and school engagement (Raufelder, Hoferichter, Ringeisen, Regner, & Jacke, 2015). Results suggested that girls' school engagement was more centered on the mother figure,

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