Social anxiety symptoms: A cross-cultural study between Lebanon and the UK

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to compare the frequency of social anxiety symptoms among young adults in Lebanon and young adults in the UK and to investigate the relationship between social anxiety, self-construals, and perceived social norms. A total of 680 young adults (312 from Lebanon and 368 from the UK) between the ages of 17 and 29 years were examined. All participants completed questionnaires used to measure social anxiety symptoms, self-construals, and reactions to perceived social norms. Lebanese young adults scored higher than UK participants on independent and interdependent self-construals. Compared to participants, Lebanese participants showed a greater acceptance of attention seeking behaviors. Though independent self-construal was negatively correlated with social interaction anxiety for both samples, cultural norms were negatively correlated with social anxiety only for the UK sample. The correlation between independent/interdependent self-construals and cultural norms/values was higher in the UK sample.

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1. Introduction

Social anxiety is characterized by perceived threat to the self in social interactions. It is among the most common types of anxiety in the world (Kessler & Üstün, 2008). Strong feelings of anxiety are often related to social interactions. What provokes the manifestation of social anxiety is different across cultures (Dinnel, Kleinknecht, & Tanaka-Matsumi, 2002). Perceived threat of social disapproval is critical to producing social anxiety. Differences in the manifestations of social anxiety are linked to how a culture defines self-construal (Essau et al., 2012). Those with independent self-concept are motivated to uphold their internal characteristics and goals, and their self-esteem stems from being viewed positively apart from others (Hoffman, Asnaani, & Hinton, 2010). Those from individualist societies, such as North Americans and Western Europeans, are more likely to construct independent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Individuals from non-Western cultures are more likely to be socialized towards enhancing solidarity within their social groups (usually familial, ethnic, or religious) and develop interdependent self-construals. Hofstede (2001) characterizes North American and Western Europeans as individualist, and non-Westerners as collectivist in world views. Most studies focused on the relationship between social anxieties in a cultural context compare North American and European samples to those that are non-Western, such as samples from Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Latin America, and India (e.g., Dinnel et al. (2002); Hoffman et al.

(2010); Essau et al. (2012) and Schreier et al. (2010)). Few studies were conducted in the Middle East. The significance of this investigation is to provide cross-regional analysis of the expression of social anxiety symptoms. For our purposes, the UK is an individualist society, while Lebanon is a relatively collectivist society, characterized by filial piety and behaving out of familial rather than individual interest.

Interdependent self-construal correlates positively with feelings of embarrassment and fear of negative evaluation, while independent self-construal correlates negatively to such feelings (Singelis & Sharkey, 1995; Norasakkunkit & Kalick, 2009). Distress in the form of anger and blame is directed at others for those with interdependent self-construal, and towards the self in the form of self-criticism in independent self-construal (Rapee & Spence, 2004).

As self-construal extends to gender, men are socialized to develop independent self-construal, while women are more likely to possess an interdependent self-construal (Cross & Madson, 1997). Social anxiety is associated with the female gender role rather than that of the male (Hoffman et al., 2010). While there are multiple elements to both self-construals, they are not mutually exclusive (Singelis, 1994). Individualist and collectivist world views can coexist at the personal and cultural levels (Ayyash-Abdo, 2001; Su, Lee, & Oishi, 2013).

In exploring gender differences in social anxiety the literature is inconsistent. However, Cabbalo, Salazar, Irurtia, Arias, and Hoffman (2014) using the social anxiety questionnaire (SAQ) and Leibowitz social anxiety scale (LSAS) assessed degrees of anxiety among adults by gender. For example, items from SAQ, include interacting with the opposite sex, speaking in public, interacting with individuals in authority. The sample consisted 17,672 women and 13,440 men and covered 18

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countries of which 37% were college students. Overall results indicate a small but consequential difference in diagnosis between males and females, with females reporting higher anxiety levels. Researchers underscored the impact of education, gender roles, and child rearing practices as contributing factors to the development of social anxiety disorder.

In a study exploring individuals' personal and perceived cultural norms and their relation to social anxiety, 909 participants from Japan, South Korea, Spain, Australia, Canada, Germany, The Netherlands, and USA answered questions describing social situations by indicating the social acceptability of the behavior of the main actor from their personal perspective and that of their culture. Results indicated that participants in collectivist countries (Japan, South Korea, and Spain) were more accepting of socially reticent behaviors than participants in individualist countries (Australia, Canada, Germany, The Netherlands, and USA) (Heinrichs et al., 2006). These results may suggest that within collectivist countries, strict social norms may evoke social anxiety due to the negative consequences if those norms are violated.

Schreier et al. (2010) conducted a replication and extension of the Heinrichs et al. (2006) study by including Latin American countries (Costa Rica and Ecuador) in the collectivist group. The sample included 478 participants from individualist countries and 388 individuals from collectivist countries (including East Asian and Latin American).

In their study, Latin American participants did not report higher levels of social anxiety than Australian and U.S. participants. Allik and McCrae (2004) found that people in Latin American countries (collectivist) displayed personality traits similar to those found in European and North American countries (individualist) and not to those found in East Asian and African countries (collectivist).

2. The present study

The main aims of the present study were to examine the degree of social anxiety symptoms and their association with self-construals and perceived social norms in Lebanon and UK. Our research questions are as follows:

(1) Do young adults in the UK and in Lebanon differ significantly in social anxiety symptoms, self-construals and perceived social norms and expectations?
(2) We expect females to score higher than males on social anxiety symptoms cultural and personal norms, and attention-seeking behavior.
(3) We assert that independent self-construal, and preference to attention seeking behavior correlate negatively with social anxiety

3. The Lebanese and British cultural orientations

Owing to political conflict, Lebanese culture is inchoate. While collectivist in orientation towards one's family and religious sect, postwar Lebanon is described as a country that is ostentatious (Khalaf, 2012). Though the Lebanese place a premium on family unity, its authenticity is slowly being replaced by attention seeking and socially dominating behaviors (Khalaf, 2012). Unlike Asian culture, where humility and self-reticent behavior are characteristic for maintaining social harmony, reticence and sacrificing one's desires for the benefit of others outside of one's family or religious sect is not encouraged. Social dominance is perceived as being a desired quality, particularly among men (Joseph, 1999). The freedom to assert one's needs, be it on behalf of one's self, family, or sect contributes to a perceived high self-esteem. This said, the Lebanese people are friendly, generous, resilient and hospitable.

Another characteristic of Lebanese culture is its use of three languages: Arabic (the native language), French, and English. Lebanese schools, be they public or private, use French or English as the primary language of instruction, with Arabic taught either as a language course,

or alongside social sciences. With the exception of two institutions, universities use French or English almost exclusively, and Arabic is no longer mandatory (Ayyash-Abdo, Alamuddin, & Mukallid, 2010). It was unsurprising that only five participants used the Arabic questionnaires and the rest used the English forms. Such a choice has implications as to the outcomes of the study.

The UK is a secular and multicultural place, with people of different ethnic origins contributing to its identity, such as the English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish. People are socialized to uphold political rights such as equity, freedom of expression, and tolerance (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). The UK ranks among the highest of individualistic countries on measures of gender equality and lowest among the scores of uncertainty avoidance. This means that UK participants accept ambiguity which is associated with less social anxiety (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Lebanese participants are expected to score higher than their UK peers on interdependent self-construals and perceived social norms and expectations. We also expect that Lebanese will report higher social anxiety symptoms than their UK peers. We hypothesize that Lebanese female participants will report greater acceptance in both their cultural and personal norms than male participants. We assert that self-construal and social norms will correlate negatively with social anxiety as participants who reported high importance of both cultural and personal norms are less likely to report social anxiety. We expect those correlations to differ between Lebanese and UK participants.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The sample for this study included 680 participants; 312 in Lebanon (male = 147; female = 165) and 368 in the UK (male = 175; female = 193). Of these participants, 322 were male and 358 (52.6%) were female. Participants' age ranged from 17 to 29 years, with a mean age of 21.4 (SD 2.82). Participants in both countries were mostly undergraduate students (82%) and single (97%). In the Lebanese sample, the age range was 17 to 29 years (mean 20.6 years, SD 2.4); 61.6% reported being Muslims, 20.8% were Christians, 13.8% not religiously affiliated and only 3.8% reported being Druze. The ethnic composition in the UK sample was diverse; (58.4% were White, 12.8% were Asian, 9.3% were Arabs, 6.5% were Latino/Hispanic, 10.6% were Black African/Black Caribbean, and 2.4% were multiracial). They ranged in age from 17 to 29 (mean 22.2 years, SD 2.95). A majority identified as Christians (45.4%), followed by not religious (35.6%), Muslims (15.5%) and Hindus, Buddhist, and Jews (1.1% each).

4.2. Procedure

With approval from the Internal Review Board, the samples from the UK and Lebanon were collected via online survey, and selected through online platforms (Facebook, Yahoo Groups, Google Groups, and Twitter) that are available to either UK citizens or Lebanese ones. In each forum, a post was written that included a brief message asking individuals to participate in a study on social anxiety, followed by a link to the questionnaire.

5. Instruments

5.1. Social interaction anxiety scale

Social interaction anxiety scale (SIAS: Mattick & Clarke, 1998) was used to measure worry in social interaction situations. Items are responded to on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = not at all and 4 = extremely). Examples of items are "I find myself worrying that I won't know what to say in social situations". The self-reported scores of the 19 performance anxiety items are added to a total score, with higher scores reflecting