Factors Predicting Social Anxiety among Middle School Children

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ABSTRACT

The current study was designed to explore the factors causing social anxiety among middle school children. Qualitative research design was used in order to answer the research questions of present study. A sample of 30 mothers of middle school children was selected purposefully from different schools of Lahore Pakistan. Data was analyzed by conducting thematic analysis using an inductive technique. Result of thematic analysis generated four main themes including parental factors, school factors, family context and child's personal characteristics accompanied by different sub categories. It was concluded that many underlying factors strengthen social anxiety among middle school children. All of these factors are associated with Parents, family, school and child's own characteristics that require special attention of professionals.

Keywords: Social anxiety, Family context, Parent child relationship, Parenting, Peer relationship.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social anxiety is a condition characterized by "a distinct and obstinate fear of one or more social or performance situations involving exposure to unacquainted people or possible inspection by others" (Hunt, 2019). Burstein et al. (2011) analyzed three aspects of social anxiety symptoms: i.e. fear of negative evaluation by others, escaping through new social situations, distress and generalized social avoidance. Individuals with social anxiety also demonstrate certain physical symptoms including increase heart rate; nausea and sweating along with fear that may create problems with individuals' quality of life (Beidel, Rao, Scharfstein, Wong, & Alfano, 2010). Social anxiety is common during adolescence and severity of symptoms can result in impairment of social, emotional and academic performance (Koyuncu et al., 2015).

Many factors contribute to social anxiety of middle school children. One factor contributing to social anxiety of children is Parental over-control (Gulley, Oppenheimer, & Hankin, 2014). Parental over-control is excessive involvement of parents in child's daily activities and motivation of extra reliance on parents (Affrunti & Ginsburg, 2012). Xu, Ni, Ran, and Zhang (2017) found that higher levels of self-rated child social anxiety were related to higher ratings of paternal over control. Another risk factor that contributes to the development of social anxiety symptoms among children is family environment as negative life events vary in different families. Frequent experiences of negative life events and parental anxiety are associated with childhood psychological problems (Grant, McMahon, Duffy, Taylor, & Compas, 2011). A third risk factor that contributes to the development of anxiety in children is child's characteristics(e.g., temperament, child sex). Caouette and Guyer (2014) found association between child's temperament and social anxiety. Lopes and Albano (2013) reported that social anxiety of children is positively associated with level of stress among children. McLean, Hansen, Eliason, and Smith (2011) found that social anxiety is more prevalent in female population than male population. While Farooq et al. (2017) did not find association between gender of children and social anxiety status. Age of children also play a role in developing social anxiety. American Psychiatric Association (2013) stated that average age for the onset of social anxiety is 13 years and 75% individuals exhibit symptoms between 8 to 15 years.

Social anxiety is a very devastating psychiatric ailment. Though it is curable, many children stay unidentified and consequently remain untreated (Jin et al., 2014). Though there is dearth of research in developing countries, the available sources deduced that social anxiety is higher. In Pakistan, there has been little research on children with social anxiety disorder. Therefore, it is important to investigate the socially anxious behavior of children with respect to parental and family factors and child' characteristics.

Research questions for this study were as follows:
1. What factors contribute in the development of socially anxious behavior among children?
2. What is the role of parent-child relationship and family in the development of socially anxious

behaviour of children?
3. Do characteristics of children contribute in the development of socially anxious behavior of children?

2. METHOD
Qualitative exploratory and descriptive research design was used to explore the variables of the present study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants of the study. Thirty mothers of children identified with social anxiety were contacted. Neither the child nor the parents had any diagnosed psychiatric illness. Sixty percent participants of the study were boys. All children were enrolled in different private schools of Lahore. Interview with open-ended questions was used to collect the data for present study. Data was collected in two phases as follows:

Phase 1: researcher contacted school administrations and explained the purpose of the research. Schools, which had identified the students with social anxiety based on teachers' daily observations, were shortlisted and administration was requested to arrange meeting with parents of children.

Phase 2: Parents of children with social anxiety were recruited to participate in the current study. After getting consent form signed, parents were interviewed according to their convenience. Interviews were recorded with the permission of parents. Each interview session was completed in 40 minutes.

Data was analyzed by conducting thematic analysis using Braun & Clark's seven steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First of all, data was transcribed after carefully listening to the interview recordings. Researcher read the transcripts multiple times in order to get familiarize with data. Next step was coding the data. Each code described the idea or feeling expressed in that part of the text. Various phrases were highlighted in different colors corresponding to different codes. All the data was organized together into groups identified by codes. Then different codes were combined to generate themes. Themes were studied in order to find their relevance with research questions and revised. Finally, the themes were given appropriate names and results were narrated coherently with the help of relevant data.

3. RESULTS
During interview, participants described social anxiety experienced by their children. They reported that their children were reluctant in interacting with relatives, friends, and family members. They described about their relationship with their children, their children's school performance and certain family events that had serious impact on child's mind. They described problems faced by their children in school and family; and how they were trying to cope with their social anxiety. The following sections outline the main themes and subthemes emerging from analysis of the interview transcripts.

3.1. Parental Factors
3.1.1. Parental Over-Control
Many participants reported that they had over-controlled their children due to the fear of being spoiled. Many of them did not allow their children to visit relatives or their friends. Some children were not allowed to make friends. Some mothers did not like their daughters to laugh or speak loudly. They did not even allow their children to give suggestions or to take decisions. Almost all mothers reported that they intruded in their child's activities. Some parents reported that they had a desire to make their children religious that is why they had to over-control them.

Participant 1: I do not allow my child to visit relatives or friends as I am afraid that he will be spoiled.
Participant 22: when my daughter laughs or speaks loudly, I scold her and warn her not to do that again.
Participant 30: I do not allow my children to give suggestions regarding domestic matters.

3.2. Lack of Love and Affection
Mothers described that they did not appreciate spending time with their children for discussing problems being faced by them in daily life. They also reported poor behavior from fathers that had made them afraid of fathers. These participants also described that their child liked to live alone and did not show love to mother, which can be a result of lack of positive association between parents and children.

Participant 3: I don't allow my child to discuss his personal and academic problems with me. He should deal with his problems by himself.
Participant 10: My child avoids coming in front of father.

3.3. Parental Anxiety
It was found that participants themselves were having social anxiety. Mothers reported that they themselves

did not like to participate in social activities. Few mothers were reluctant to interact with unknown. Few of them told they did not like to participate but had to participate forcefully. Mothers also revealed feelings of dissatisfaction during interview as they were having unfulfilled desires.

Participant 20: I feel like everybody is staring at me and will make fun of me.

Participant 29: I don't participate in social gatherings as I hesitate interacting with other people

3.4. School Factors

Almost all participants reported average school performance of their children. It was found that poor response from peers contribute to social anxiety. Many participants described that their child did not have any friend and preferred to live alone. While others reported that, their children were starving for social approval. During interview, it was also explored that most of the children with social anxiety had dejected feelings from teachers as not being involved in classroom activities and extra-curricular activities, which could be a reason of social anxiety.

Participant16: when my child tries to play with his friends they avoid him and make fun of him.

Participant 08: My child complaints that her teacher pays more attention to other students and doesn't allow her to participate in classroom activities.

3.5. Family Context

Participants described multiple factors, which had made their children quite. According to mothers certain illness of one of the parents, separation of parents, and second marriage of father had obscured their children from participating in social activities. Job of mothers was another dilemma, which had forced mothers to remain away from their children. Few mothers described that frequent parental conflicts disturbed children a lot.

Participant 11: My husband beats me and shouts at me that has disturbed my child a lot.

Participant 18: My husband's second marriage has made my child reluctant in meeting with friends and relatives.

Participant 23: After my divorce my child has become quite and prefers to remain isolated

3.6. Child's Characteristics

In the present study, maximum data is based on male children so it is difficult to predict role of child sex in developing social anxiety. Mothers revealed that their children with social anxiety were also more vulnerable to stress. Shyness was another child characteristic reported by mothers which refuse them to participate in social activities.

Participant 24: I think my child remains quiet due to excessive stress in our family environment.

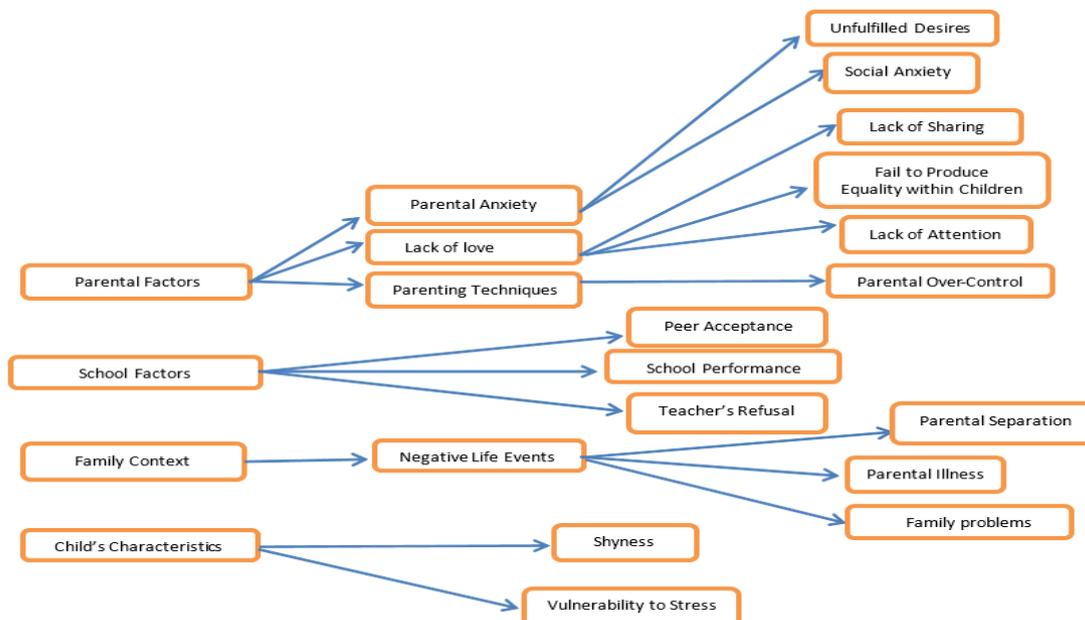Participant 06: He is very shy and does not get involved with others conveniently.

Figure 1.

4. DISCUSSION

Findings of this study suggest that parental over-control is a factor, which contribute to the social anxiety of children in middle childhood. Finding of this study is consistent with the findings of Xu et al. (2017) who found high level of social anxiety among children whose parents had high over-control over their children. Finding of current study is not consistent with Akinsola and Udoka (2013) who found significant association of permissive parenting style with social anxiety of children.

Findings of this study highlighted lack of love and affection between parents and children as a predictor of social anxiety among children. This finding is not consistent with the findings of Majdandžić, Möller, De Vente, Bögels, and van den Boom (2014) who reported that challenging parenting behavior of father improves social anxiety whereas, challenging behavior of mother contribute to social anxiety. Moreover, increased love and affection of parents cannot improve social anxiety of children. The differences in the results can be due to Majdanzic' research sample as his research was based on parents of 2-4 years old children. This suggests that the role of challenging parenting behavior may be different when compared with different age groups.

Findings of the present study showed that poor peer behavior also contribute to social anxiety among children and this result is consistent with the findings of Blöte, Miers, Heyne, and Westenberg (2015). Present study found teachers' refusal as a factor of social anxiety among children, which is consistent with the findings of Saltali and Durmusoglu (2013) who reported that the teacher student relationship effects social anxiety of children.

Findings of present study suggest that negative events in family contribute to social anxiety which is consistent with the findings of Gómez-Ortiz, Romera, Jiménez-Castillejo, Ortega-Ruiz, and García-López (2019) and Rant et al. (2011). Findings of present study suggest that stress is a contributing factor to social anxiety, which is consistent with the findings of Lopes and Albano (2013) who reported that social anxiety of children is positively associated with level of stress among children. It is recommended that this study be conducted on larger scale to draw

5. CONCLUSION

It is concluded that many underlying factors intensify social anxiety among middle school children. All of these factors are associated with parents, family, school and child's own characteristics that require special attention of professionals.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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