

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANXIETY, INTOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY & SELF-CONCEPT CLARITY: A STUDY ON INDIAN YOUTH

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Abstract: *Anxiety is a feeling of edginess and vexation, usually generalized and distributed as an exaggerated reaction to a situation that is subjectively seen as alarming. Intolerance of uncertainty is the tendency to react negatively to unknown situations and experiences on an emotional, cognitive, and behavioral level. The degree to which self-concept beliefs are explicitly and confidently established, internally consistent, and stable over time is referred to as self-concept clarity. The youth today faces many challenges in terms of career advancement, relationship coping struggles, competition, peer pressure, body image, and appearances, among other things. In addition to socio-environmental, personal, and psychological factors, the mental and physical health of the youth is also significantly impacted. The present study focused on the relationship between anxiety, intolerance of uncertainty and self-concept clarity among the emerging adults. It was found that anxiety was positively correlated with intolerance of uncertainty ($r=.805$, $\alpha= .01$) and negatively correlated with self-concept clarity ($r=-.814$, $\alpha= .01$); while intolerance of uncertainty was found to be negatively correlated to self-concept clarity ($r=-.821$, $\alpha= .01$). The present study would thus help explore different facets about youth, they way they cope with anxiety, the mechanisms and reference frameworks they use to evaluate themselves and while doing all this; how comfortable they are with the ever-changing scenarios of life.*

Keywords: *Anxiety, Intolerance, Uncertainty, Self-concept, Youth*

1. INTRODUCTION

Often conveyed by nervous behavior, anxiety is an emotional state marked by an unpleasant state of inner upheaval. Anxiety is a feeling of edginess and vexation, usually generalized and distributed as an exaggerated reaction to a situation that is subjectively seen as alarming. It is oftentimes accompanied by muscular tension, uneasiness, weariness and difficulty in concentration. Anxiety is often closely associated with fear but the two are not synonymous. Fear is a response to a actual or

sensed proximate danger; while anxiety involves the anticipation of a future threat. People experiencing anxiety may retreat from settings or conditions which have given rise to anxiety in the past. Anxiety can be experienced with prolonged and persistent symptoms that deteriorate the quality of life, also referred to as chronic (or generalized) anxiety. On the other hand, it can also be experienced in short surges with unpredictable, exhausting and draining panic attacks, called acute anxiety.

Symptoms of anxiety may vary in their nature and impact from one person to another. Anxiety can cause physiological, psychological, behavioral, emotional and cognitive effects on an individual which may include neurological, digestive and respiratory problems; the tendency to harm oneself; avoiding the situations that have proven to be unpleasant in the past; feelings of dread or apprehension and; thoughts about the suspended dangers in one's environment.

Intolerance of uncertainty is the tendency to react negatively to unknown situations and experiences on an emotional, cognitive, and behavioural level. Intolerance of uncertainty is considered to be a dispositional trait that stems from a set of negative views about uncertainty and its repercussions, as well as a proclivity to react negatively to uncertain circumstances and occurrences on an emotional, cognitive, and physiological level [1] (Buhr & Dugas, 2009).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research in the field of intolerance of uncertainty began a few years prior to the development of Dugas et al. (1998) model of GAD. [2] At that time, there was a large body of research on a concept called "Intolerance of Ambiguity" (IoA), which was coined fifty years ago by Frenkel-Brunswick (1948) [3]. This term was coined to describe someone's predisposition to see ambiguous situations as dangerous and to respond with discomfort and avoidance when confronted with new or

difficult problems that cannot be solved [4, 5] (Budner, 1962; Grenier, Barrette, & Ladouceur, 2005). Intolerance of uncertainty is a complex mental process which is considered to be comprising of three key components:

- Positive beliefs regarding worrying: This kind of positive beliefs lead to the idea that worrying is beneficial in some way. As if worrying can help an individual to achieve certainty in unpredictable life situations.
- Negative problem orientation: Negative problem orientation occurs when the individual feels unable to solve problems, perceives problems as daunting or as hurdles or limitations, and has doubts about his potential to resolve complications
- Cognitive avoidance: Cognitive avoidance refers to the practice of only coping with issues when they are truly unavoidable.

Individuals who suffer from anxiety, particularly those who worry excessively as adults, appear to be more intolerant of uncertainty and will always attempt to forecast and prepare for anything in order to avoid or eliminate it.

The degree to which self-concept beliefs are explicitly and confidently established, internally consistent, and stable over time is referred to as self-concept clarity. Self-concept clarity is one of a cohort of constructs that concentrate on the self-structural concept's aspects. Self-concept clarity is a reliable indicator of self-assurance. In addition, self-concept clarity is significantly connected to the execution of concrete identity decisions, while it is negatively associated with identity crises resulting from the reconsideration and abandonment of current commitments.

Some people have a strong sense of understanding regarding who they are and where they want to go in life. They understand their own strengths and limitations, as well as the essence of their personalities and their positions on critical attitudes and values. On the other hand, some people may have less defined self-concepts. These people may not be secure of who they are, may not know where they stand on important topics, and may be unsure of their abilities. Self-concept clarity refers to the degree to which people with a strong self-concept are aware of who they are, do not hold contradictory views, and maintain consistent perspectives over time. As opposed to self-esteem, which is seen as an overall assessment of the self as good or poor,

self-concept clarity is the way people's information about themselves is cognitively structured.

2.1 Anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty

Intolerance of uncertainty has been identified as a critical process variable in the treatment of generalized anxiety disorder. A number of professional practitioners have previously employed intolerance of uncertainty as a point of intervention for a wide range of anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder. There are three plausible explanations for the relationship between anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty. The first issue that must be addressed to understand this relationship is the lack of agency (i.e., a sense of uncontrollability). The second element to consider is the inevitability of negative effects in the future. The third aspect to consider is the occurrence of events that are undeniably certain but have not yet been recognized as potentially dangerous (Carleton et al, 2014) [6]. Although both common and particularized susceptibilities can contribute to the emergence and retention of anxiety disorders, a large number of psychopathology models suggest that intolerance of uncertainty (IU) is a central feature of anxiety-related encounter (Shihata et al, 2016) [7]. It is also considered that a high IU level causes in an increased identification of prospective difficulties and a negative problem orientation (Dugas et al., 1997) [8], both of which have been associated to generalised anxiety disorder. Numerous studies have found a significant connection between IU and symptoms of anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and OCD [9-13] (Freeston et al., 1994; Steketee et al., 1998; Clark, 2002; Tolin et al., 2003; Dugas et al., 2007). Some studies, on the other hand, have found a more specific link between IU and GAD, which is consistent with the idea that IU contributes to the disorder's unique origin and clinical presentation.

2.2 Anxiety and Self Concept Clarity

Self-concept Clarity draws attention to an organism's coherence of identity, how certain one is in one's traits, and to what extent are these traits consistent and stable. Lack of self-concept clarity has been linked to poor psychological adjustment and functioning, which may result in a condition of continual uneasiness and doubt consequently paving the way for a variety of psychological anomalies, including depression, anxiety, and autism.

Higher degrees of self-concept clarity, on the other hand, have been connected to adaptive psychological adjustment and functioning [14] (Lodi-Smith, J., & DeMarree, K. G., 2017). In a study conducted on 235 participants aiming at examining the impact of self-concept clarity and intolerance of uncertainty on the symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), it was found that elevated intolerance of uncertainty and lower self-concept clarity emerged as unique correlates of high GAD symptoms [15] (Kusec et al., 2016). Self-concept clarity has also been connected to other aspects of anxiety, such as social anxiety and adult separation anxiety disorder. According to some theories, there is a substantial probability that social anxiety disorder is produced by unfavourable mental conceptions of the self-paired with a fear of exposing these core beliefs of the self [16] (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). People with low self-concept clarity are more likely to develop social anxiety disorder because external stimuli are more likely to alter their self-concepts. Self-concept clarity has been found to have a substantial negative relationship with social anxiety, implying that people who have low self-concept clarity have higher levels of social anxiety [17] (Krupa, 2018). With a lot of studies focusing on the fact that self-concept clarity influences the anxiety levels in individuals, some researches have also focused on the fact that existing anxiety may also affect one's self-concept clarity. In a laboratory experiment conducted by Orr & Moscovitch (2015) [18], it was found that manipulations aimed at reducing the participants' self-concept clarity were only successful with the participants who had already high levels of social anxiety.

2.3 Intolerance of uncertainty and self-concept clarity

Individuals with higher levels of self-concept clarity have a strong sense of understanding regarding who they are and where they want to go in life. They understand their own strengths and limitations, as well as the essence of their personalities and their positions on critical attitudes and values which makes them prepared to deal with the unknown situations life may put forth for them as well as to deal with them effectively thus indicating an antagonistic relationship between the two.

In a study conducted on 166 university students, significant negative correlation was found between self-concept clarity and intolerance of uncertainty thus strengthening

the fact that being aware of one's self can make a person face unpredictable life situations with greater efficiency [19] (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006). A study conducted on 235 participants indicated that high levels of intolerance of uncertainty and low levels of anxiety were the key correlates of generalized anxiety disorder [15] (Kusec, Tallon & Koerner, 2016). Several studies have highlighted a low self-concept clarity and high intolerance of uncertainty as factors hindering personal growth while higher levels of self-concept clarity have been associated with positive mental states and life stances [20-22] (Leite & Kuiper, 2008; Cicero, 2017; Birrell et al, 2011).

3. METHOD AND MEASUREMENTS

The participants comprised of 300 college and university students including both males and females. A purposive sampling technique was used for the same.

3.1 Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale, Short Form (IUS-12)

The IUS-12 was developed by Carleton and colleagues (2007) [23] as a 12-item short-form of the original 27-item Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale [9] (Freston et al., 1994), which assesses responses to uncertainty, ambiguous situations, and the future.

3.2 The Self-Concept Clarity Scale (SCCS)

The self-concept clarity scale tends to assess the extent to which self-beliefs are stable, clearly stated and confidently defined. The self-concept clarity scale is a 12 item uni-dimensional self-report measure of the temporal stability, consistency and clarity of self-beliefs [24] (Campbell et al., 1996)

3.3. Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI)

The Beck Anxiety Inventory, developed by Beck, Epstein, Brown, and Steer [25] (1988), is a 21-item multiple-choice self-report inventory used to assess the severity of anxiety in children and adults.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of research's results is described in the tables 1 and 2, and discussion part of the paper's text clarifies some scientific validation/invalidation

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics (N=300)*

	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
SCC	36.48	7.07	21	58
IU	34.52	7.63	14	60
Anxiety	26.06	11.03	2	54

SCC- Self-concept clarity; IU- Intolerance of Uncertainty

Table 2: *Correlational Analysis*

	SCC	IU	Anxiety
SCC	1	-.821**	-.814**
IU		1	.805**
Anxiety			1

**Significant at .01 level

It was evident from the obtained data that the participants reported average levels of self concept clarity and intolerance of uncertainty while slightly below average level of anxiety was reported. Correlation analysis indicated that both anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty are negatively correlated to anxiety while a positive correlation was found between intolerance of uncertainty and anxiety.

The objective of the present study was to assess the relationship between anxiety, intolerance of uncertainty and self-concept clarity among university students. The results revealed that anxiety was positively correlated with intolerance of uncertainty while it was negatively associated with self-concept clarity. Intolerance of uncertainty was also found to be negatively associated with self-concept clarity while a positive association was found between anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty. The results are discussed in detail as follows:

4.1 Anxiety and Self-concept clarity

Results (table 2) showed that anxiety and self-concept clarity have a significant negative correlation ($r=-.814$, $p<.001$). While self-concept clarity makes a person accept his shortcomings and have faith in his abilities, anxiety makes him doubtful about his efficiency to deal with upcoming life events. High levels of self-concept clarity can enhance adaptiveness and functional flexibility while lower levels of self-concept clarity may pave

way for problems like anxiety and depression [14] (Lodi-Smith, J., & DeMarree, K. G., 2017). Emerging adults belong to an age group that is still exploring their identities, strengths and weaknesses; those who can clearly put a finger on who they really are or want to be are more open to failure, constructive criticism and a meaningful feedback while the ones who cannot separate their real selves from their ideal selves or deny their potentials and shortcomings can never be prepared enough for the unforeseen in life and will always be nervous and on edge when it comes to handling situations.

4.2 Anxiety and Intolerance of Uncertainty

Results (table 2) showed that anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty have a significant positive correlation ($r=.805$, $p<.001$). Inability to perform with optimum potential and efficiency under sudden or novel situations is one of the consequences of anxiety. Those who cannot bear uncertainty and sudden changes in their daily lives and routines are also found to be uneasy, unable to function and display changes in their emotional and mood states while dealing with something new. A high IU level causes in an increased focus on possible difficulties and a negative problem orientation [9] (Freeston et al., 1994), both of which have been associated to generalised anxiety disorder. Numerous studies have found a significant connection between IU and symptoms of anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and OCD [9-13] (Freeston et al., 1994; Steketee et al., 1998; Clark, 2002; Tolin et al., 2003; Dugas et al., 2007).

4.3 Intolerance of Uncertainty and Self-concept clarity

Results (table 2) showed that intolerance of uncertainty and self-concept clarity have a significant negative correlation ($r=-.821$, $p<.001$). It has been known from numerous studies that intolerance of uncertainty may lead to excessive worry and maladjustment while self-concept clarity enables an individual to stay stable in face of any unforeseen situation as the person has an accurate understanding of his potentials and the resources at hand. It has also been found that individuals with higher levels of intolerance of uncertainty often indulge in social comparisons and are not content with the things at hand thus further promoting a lack of mastery on one's life while higher levels of self-concept clarity would do the opposite [19] (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006).

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study indicate that higher levels of self-concept clarity can help reducing the impact of anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty on emerging adults. Programs focusing on inculcating mind-sets and behaviours that promote self-acceptance can be useful in alleviating or minimizing the impact of anxiety as well as will promote tolerance among the youth.

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