

A Cross-Sectional Study of the Effects of Experiential Avoidance and Cognitive Fusion on Social Anxiety Mediated by the Fear of Negative and Positive Evaluations

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Background

Social anxiety often develops by adolescence and the disadvantages of suffering from it early in life are enormous. Notably, the cognitive component of cognitive-behavioral models of social anxiety typically focus on the Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE). However, the Fear of Positive Evaluation (FPE) has also gained importance recently and is known to influence social anxiety through different pathways than FNE. In this context, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is sometimes used to treat social anxiety and the treatment process is assumed to include experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion. This study examined whether experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion mediate FNE and FPE, and influence social anxiety and depressive symptoms in adolescents.

Methods

A total of 379 Japanese young adults (123 males, 251 females, 1 other, and 4 who did not identify) aged 18 to 30 years were surveyed through an online questionnaire and included in the analysis. The mean age was 24.34 years ($SD = 4.07$). The questionnaire scales included: (1) Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II, (2) Cognitive Fusion Questionnaire, (3) Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, (4) Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale, (5) Quick Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology, and (6) Social Interaction Anxiety Scale. Next, covariance structural equation modeling was conducted with a hypothetical model assuming the effects of experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion on social anxiety and depressive symptoms mediated by the FPE and FNE. Then, the modeling was performed again using an adjusted model where paths that were not significant in the hypothetical model were removed.

Results

The goodness of fit of the model was $\chi^2(2) = 0.527$, $GFI = 0.999$, $AGFI = 0.988$, $CFI = 1.000$, $RMSEA = 0.000$. In the modified model, experiential avoidance influenced FNE and FPE, while cognitive fusion influenced FNE. Finally, social anxiety symptoms were influenced by experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion, FNE, and FPE. Depressive symptoms were influenced by experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion, and FPE.

Discussion

The results suggest that both experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion influenced FNE, while only experiential avoidance influenced FPE. As both FNE and FPE influence social anxiety symptoms, acceptance may be important when focusing interventions on FPE. Next, while FNE did not influence depression, FPE did influence it. This may be related to Anhedonia as a downregulation of positive valence. Future research should consider other core processes in the ACT, and examine causal relationships from both negative and positive valence aspects.

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Background

Social anxiety is based on the Fear of Negative/Positive Evaluation. We examined the effects of the Psychological Flexibility on the Fear of Evaluation and social anxiety.

➤ Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is ...

a psychiatric disorder that causes functional impairment in daily life due to excessive tension and anxiety in interpersonal situations.

- ✓ SAD commonly coexists with depression in the majority of cases, leading to significant impairment of social functioning, especially when it manifests early in life or in combination with depression (Nagata et al., 2004).
- ✓ The presence of social anxiety disorder is a strong risk/exacerbating factor for the onset of depression (Stein et al., 2001).

It is essential to examine prevention and intervention methods for the onset of social anxiety disorder during the critical period of adolescence/young adulthood.

➤ Exacerbating and maintaining factors

- ✓ In the cognitive-behavioral model of SAD, there are cognitive constructs known as the **Fear of the Negative Evaluation (FNE)** and the **Fear of Positive Evaluation (FPE)**, which are related to SAD through distinct pathways (e.g., Reilly, Carleton, & Weeks, 2012).

➤ Treatment-Related Variables

- ✓ Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) explains psychopathology through the concepts of **Experiential Avoidance** and **Cognitive Fusion**.

We examined the impact of Experiential Avoidance and Cognitive Fusion, mediated by FPE and FNE, on social anxiety symptoms and depressive symptoms.

Methods

Most participants in the survey were university students.

[Participants]

A total of 379 participants aged 18-30 responded.
123 males, 251 females, 1 other, and 4 who did not identify
Mean age: 24.34, *SD* = 4.07

[Procedure]

The survey was conducted via university lectures, email, social media, and crowdworking platforms..

[Questionnaire Content]

① Experiential Avoidance

Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (Shima et al., 2013): 1 factor, 7 items.

② Cognitive Fusion

Cognitive Fusion Questionnaire (Shima et al., 2016): 1 factor, 7 items.

③ FNE Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (Sasagawa et al., 2004):

2 factors, 12 items. Used 8 items excluding reversals.

④ FPE Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale (Maeda et al., 2015):

1 factor, 10 items. Used 8 items excluding reversals.

⑤ Depressive symptoms

Quick Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology (Fujisawa et al., 2010): 16 items. Total scores used.

⑥ Social anxiety symptoms

Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (Kanai et al., 2004): 2 factors, 20 items. Total scores used.

Results & Discussion

Experiential Avoidance influenced social anxiety through FNE and FPE mediation, while Cognitive Fusion influenced social anxiety through FNE mediation.

[Results of SEM based on the hypothesized model]

- ▶ The paths "from **Cognitive Fusion** to **FPE**" and "from **FNE** to **Depressive symptoms**" were not significant.
- ▶ They were subsequently removed, and the modified model was used for covariance structure analysis.

[The goodness of fit of the model]

$\chi^2 = .527$, *GFI* = .999, *AGFI* = .988, *CFI* = 1.000, *RMSEA* = .000
→ The results show a sufficiently high model fit.

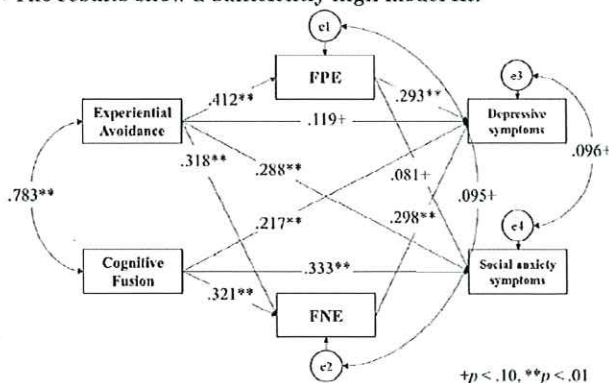


Figure 1. The Modified model on the impact of experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion through fear of positive and negative evaluation on social anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Note: FNE: Fear of Negative Evaluation, FPE: Fear of Positive Evaluation

[Effects on social anxiety symptoms]

- The effects from **Experiential Avoidance** to **Social anxiety symptoms** were mediated by **FNE** and **FPE**, and direct effects were also observed.
- The effects of **Cognitive Fusion** to **Social anxiety symptoms** were mediated by **FNE** and direct effects were also observed.

- ▶ When addressing the Fear of Evaluation as a cognitive component to reduce social anxiety symptoms, it seems effective to reduce experiential avoidance.
- ▶ If there is no need to address the FPE, it seems to be effective to reduce cognitive fusion.

[Effects on depressive symptoms]

- The effect from **Experiential Avoidance** to **Depressive symptoms** was found with a significant trend for **FPE**, and direct effects were also observed.
- The effects from **Cognitive Fusion** to **Depressive symptoms** were not mediated by **FNE** and **FPE**, only direct effects.
- ▶ The variables that had an impact on depressive symptoms were Experiential Avoidance, Cognitive Fusion, and FPE. It is important to note that this finding differs from many previous studies, as FNE did not have an influence on depressive symptoms.

Limitations

- ① Because it is a cross-sectional study, the causal relationship is unclear.
- ② The limitation of generalizability exists due to the predominantly university student sample.
- ③ The study focuses on only two variables related to the therapeutic process of ACT.

発表概要報告書

2023年6月1日から4日にかけて開催された10th World Congress of Cognitive and Behavioral Therapiesに、現地韓国ソウルにて参加した。ポスター発表は2日と3日、それぞれ前半と後半があり、私が筆頭である発表は2日の後半であった。

【発表内容の概要】

発表題目“A Cross-Sectional Study of the Effects of Experiential Avoidance and Cognitive Fusion on Social Anxiety Mediated by the Fear of Negative and Positive Evaluations”にてポスター発表を行った。大学生を対象に調査を実施した研究であり、Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (以下、ACT) の体験の回避と認知的フュージョンの程度が社交不安症状に与える影響について、否定的評価への恐れと肯定的評価への恐れを介した点を含め検討したものである。主要な成果としては、体験の回避と認知的フュージョンの影響の差異について、否定的・肯定的評価への恐れを介した点から明らかにした点である。これらからは、社交不安症状に特異的な肯定的評価への恐れへ介入するには体験の回避にアプローチすることが有用であることが示唆された。

【学会参加・発表で得られた成果】

今回、初めて対面での国際学会の参加であったが、多くの方にポスターを見ていただき、意見交換を行うことができた。また、呈示されているポスター発表の数も多く、ACTや社交不安症など私が発表していたテーマに近い研究者の方とのやり取りは、非常に刺激的であった。特に、スピリチュアリティおよび宗教性はACTの比喩表現を用いた心理教育に影響を与えてうるため、文化圏が異なることで介入要素の位置づけも異なることがあり得た。

今回得られた知見を元にポスター発表した内容で執筆し、論文「心理的柔軟性が社交不安症状に与える影響——他者からの肯定的・否定的評価への恐れを含めた包括的検討——」として公開に至っている。分析内容やその方法について助言をいただいたり、より踏み込んだ考察を行うための足掛かりや有益な論文を紹介していただいたりなど、非常に有意義な時間を過ごすことができた。

そのほか学会では多くの口頭発表・シンポジウム等が行われており、ACTや社交不安症に関連する演題も散見され、いくつか参加し国際基準での研究の進捗について知ることができた。今回の経験は、今後の臨床・研究活動に情熱を注がせるものであり、国際的な視野を持ちながら研鑽を積み、情報を発信していくための大きな動機づけとなった。

(日本語 1200字以内)

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