

## **Gender and Age Differences in Social Anxiety among Iranian Immigrants Children in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Studies from clinical populations about the children have shown that social anxiety is a disorder in early childhood to mid-adulthood. In this regard, this study focused on comparing the gender and age categories difference in social anxiety among Iranian primary school children living in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia. The sample size of this study is 215 primary school pupils aged between 9 – 12 years old; and data was collected using Social Anxiety Scale for Children – Revised (SASC-R) (La Greca & Stone, 1993). The result indicted no significant difference between male and female as well as age categories in social anxiety among the respondents. This means, children who participated in this study did not differ significant in terms of social anxiety disorder based on gender and age categories. By implication, early detection of social anxiety disorder among children would ease treatment and intervention which will subsequently prevent social anxiety.*

**Keywords:** *children, Social anxiety, Gender, Age.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Childhood anxiety has been limited in the literature of child psychology. While the content of children's fears has been investigated during last one hundred years and in spite of the recent growth in exploration, this issue still seems to go mostly undetected in schools, especially in early childhood. Recent years have seen significant progress in investigation on childhood social anxiety which is defined by American Psychological Association (2013) as a fear of social and performance situations in which embarrassment or humiliation may occur. Epidemiological researches showed that anxiety is one of the most common psychological disorder in children as it is the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest mental health problem in the world and among the most widespread and common condition in children and adolescents which studies showed that, about 3 – 4% of children are suffering from social anxiety disorder (Kashani & Orvaschel, 1990; Kley, Heinrichs, Bender, & Tuschen-Caffier, 2012; Workman, 2009). Thus, regardless of the expansion and validation of various measures for evaluating social anxiety and studying its features among children, there are still different ideas over whether there are sex and age differences in the exhibition of social anxiety and its different constituents among children (Saura et al., 2011).

#### **Age of Onset and Gender Differences**

Studies from clinical populations about the onset of social anxiety have shown that social anxiety is a disorder with early onset, generally in the early to mid-adulthood (Rapee, 1995). Several findings have constantly indicated that most of the individuals with social anxiety report onset before 18 years, with a mean age of onset of 10 to 13 years (Nelson et al., 2000; Rapee & Spence, 2004). Onset seems to be particularly early for the more severe (generalized) subtype (Wittchen, Stein, & Kessler, 1999). Results of past researches also demonstrated that, the prevalence of social anxiety starting in adulthood is very low (4 – 5 per 1000 per year) and that these new cases are commonly accompanied by other disorder (specifically panic disorder or major depression) (Neufeld, Swartz, Bienvenu, Eaton, & Cai, 1999). Therefore, onset of totally new cases of social phobia after late adolescence is very unusual. Remarkably, high levels of social anxiety can be appearing even in early childhood. Etiologically, it can be noted that moving from a high level of social anxiety to a formal diagnosis of social phobia would be contingent on the age at which symptoms cause impairment in the individual's life. Early to mid-adolescence is expected to be a crucial time for many people as a result of the raising importance of social communications at this developmental period. Several studies have shown slight change or even little reductions in social anxiety and self-consciousness from late childhood to early adolescence (Bruch & Heimberg, 1994; Campbell, Rapee, & Spence, 2001; Rankin, Lane, Gibbons, & Gerrard, 2004). Rao et al., (2007) revealed that children with social anxiety had a bigger form of general psychopathology than adolescents and are more vulnerable to become worried on doing things properly and being apart from their parents. These results are consistent with the overall evidence of fears and anxiety in children, where incidence of fears and phobias with the exception of social anxiety are higher among younger children than adolescents (Beidel & Alfano, 2011). The apparent onset of social anxiety in late childhood or

early adolescence may be due to increases in life interference caused by social interaction at this developmental stage.

Meanwhile, researches investigating gender differences of social anxiety have been showed inconsistent results; but majority of past studies found a significantly higher mean scores on social anxiety for female than male. This means, considerable number of researches indicated that percentage of social anxiety among females children is higher, and this difference can be reflected in adolescence to adulthood (Canino et al., 2004; Costello, Mustillo, Erkanli, Keeler, & Angold, 2003; Inam, Mahjabeen, & Abiodullah, 2012). So gender differences in social anxiety disorder would be increasing during the child growth with females demonstrating more anxiety than males (Bittner et al., 2007; Canino et al., 2004; Van Roy, Kristensen, Groholt, & Clench-Aas, 2009). La Greca and Lopez (1998) found that girls have shown higher social anxiety than boys. In line with this, Morgan and Banerjee (2006) in their study on socially anxious children's social behavior and self-evaluation, sampled 28 high socially anxious and 28 low socially anxious children within the age range of 11 to 13 years old. Their results was in line with the past studies showing that social anxiety in females is higher, and concluded that females exhibit more social anxiety in verbal reactions.

Gren-Landell et al., (2009) in a study to explored gender difference on social anxiety disorder in Swedish Adolescents, showed that girls were at higher risk of social anxiety. Similarly, Schumacher (Dimech & Seiler, 2011) found a significant difference between female and male with females have higher social anxiety disorder than males. Furthermore, Inam et al. (2012) conducted a study to find out the prevalence of social anxiety among primary school children and gender difference. The result indicated a significant difference between male and female with females having more socially anxious than males.

Based on the aforementioned studies, one can see that females are more vulnerable to anxiety in different social circumstances such as communication and performance, also experiencing more physical and cognitive symptoms. However, in contrast Weeks, Coplan and Kingsbury (2009) found no differences between boys and girls in young children (aged 7-8 years) with symptoms of social anxiety. Likewise, Becker, Ginsburg, Domingues and Tein (2010) also reported no gender difference in child anxiety.

Moreover, Lyneham, Street, Abbott and Rapee (2008) used the School Anxiety Scale-Teacher Report (SAS-TR) to assess anxiety in children at school for aged 5–12 years, and they found no significant age and gender differences on the total or subscale SAS-TR scores. Hajiamini et al., (2012) used the same instrument on 200 Iranian primary school children within the ages of 6 – 10 years old. Their result also showed no significant gender difference on social anxiety among the respondents.

Clarke, Cooper and Creswell (2013) and Maria, Fraire, Vulić-Prtorić and Macuka (2006) concluded that the socially anxious and non-anxious child did not significantly differ in terms of gender. Cederlund (2013) also found similar insignificant difference on social anxiety disorder among females and males children but they found a significant gender difference in adolescence which indicated females having high social anxiety than males. The reason of this difference is not clear but it has been suggested that hormonal changes or different social expectations can be possible explanations (Vasey & Dadds, 2001). Whereas other studies show significantly higher mean scores of social anxiety for male than females (Memik et al., 2010) or no gender differences (Ranta et al., 2012). Given these inconsistent findings regarding gender and age differences in social anxiety, the present study aimed the compare the difference between gender (male and female) and age categories (9 – 12 years old) among Iranian primary school children in Malaysia. With regard to this objective the researcher proposed the following hypotheses:

H<sub>1</sub>: There is significant difference between male and female on social anxiety among Iranian primary school children in Malaysia.

H<sub>2</sub>: There is significant difference between age categories (9 – 12 years) on social anxiety among Iranian primary school children in Malaysia.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### Participants

In this study, 215 Iranian primary school children participated in which 108 (49.8%) of participants were females and 107 (50.2%) of were males within the age range of 9 – 12 years old. The participants were selected from three Iranian primary school in Kuala-Lumpur, in which two of schools are government (Emam Khomeini 1, Emam Khomeini 2) and the other one is private (Marefat). Cluster random sampling technique was used with the aim of ensuring that all participants had an equal chance to be selected.

### Measurement Instrument

#### Social Anxiety Scales for Children Revised, (SASC-R)

Social Anxiety Scale for Children – Revised (SASC-R) (La Greca & Stone, 1993) is suggested for use with preadolescent's children who have been evaluated using both 5-point Likert and a 3 point rating format (La Greca & Stone, 1993). Because the 5 point Likert format produced higher reliability, it is recommended that the

5-point rating format be used whenever is possible. So, this scale consists 18 items that defined social worries and fear, along with four filler items. The statements related to fear of negative appraisal, social avoidance and distress in new situations, and social avoidance and distress in general such as “I worry about being teased” “I’m quiet when I’m with a group of children” “I feel nervous when I’m around certain children”. Children asked to specify how often each item was true for them, on a 5 points Likert from 1 (not at all) to 5 (all the time). Test-retest reliabilities have been evaluated in several samples, in general, high reliability of .70 have been obtained for the total SASC-R score (Findlay, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). And Scores which are in the range of 50 – 54 or higher are indicated a clinical level of social anxiety (La Greca & Lopez, 1998).

**Procedure**

A discussion about study was established with the participants’ school teachers and psychology counsellors in order explain for them the aim of the study and describe the questionnaire to be used. That process is done for getting permission to carry out the research and requesting their cooperation and help during study. Meanwhile, a meeting was held with parents to clarify the research and getting their written informed consent permitting their children to participate in the research. The Social Anxiety Scale for Children – Revised (SASC-R), was administered in the classroom. An identification number was earlier allocated to the response sheets distributed to the pupils. All participants were asked to fill out the identification data (gender, age, and school) and the response guideline was read out loudly for all participants. The research was present during the administration of the questionnaire to clear any possible doubts and make sure that the participants answered the questionnaire themselves. Mean time of submission for the questionnaire was 20-25 minutes.

**III. RESULT**

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the difference in child social anxiety between males and females. As illustrated in Table 1 below, the analysis shown that, there was no significant difference in child social anxiety between male (M = 53.88, SD = 12.15) and female (M = 55.41, SD = 11.77),  $t_{(213)} = -.939$ ,  $p = .349$ , therefore, the hypothesized difference ( $H_1$ ) between gender groups is rejected. This means, both males and females children who participated in this study did not differ significant in terms of social anxiety disorder. However, the Mean distribution indicated that, female children are having slightly higher social anxiety than male. The finding of this study is consistent with Weeks (2009) who have reported that, there were no significant differences between boys and girls in young children (aged 7-8 years) on symptoms of social anxiety (Becker et al., 2010; Clarke et al., 2013; Lyneham et al., 2008)

However, the finding is contrary to the study of Al-Naggar and Hajiamini et al. (2012) which mentioned that, the occurrence of social anxiety is not equal between girls and boys; as considerable number of past researches showed evidence about incidence of social anxiety in children specially among girls, which can extend to their adolescence and then to adulthood (Bittner et al., 2007; Canino et al., 2004a, 2004b; Costello et al., 2003a; Green-Landell, 2010; Inam et al., 2012b; March, Parker, Sullivan, Stallings, & Connors, 1997; Morgan & Banerjee, 2006; Niditch & Varela, 2012; Roy et al., 2009). Similarly, in European countries, Fehm, Pelissolo, Furmark, and Wittchen (2005) discovered that girls showed to be more vulnerable to social anxiety than boys and also the study found that, girls exhibit higher percentage of mental disorders. This gender difference has also been observed in children and adolescents (Essau, Olaya, Pasha, O’Callaghan, & Bray, 2012; La Greca & Lopez, 1998; Rapee & Spence, 2004). More so, in another study conducted by Schumacher Dimech and Seiler (2011) also have identified a significant difference between females and males in which females have higher Mean scores for social anxiety than males.

**Table 1:** Independence Sample t-test of Gender Difference on Social Anxiety

Variable	n	Mean	SD	df	t	p
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	108	53.88	12.15	213	-.939	.349
Female	107	55.41	11.77			

Moreover, the ANOVA result in Table 2 shown that there was no significant difference between age categories in children social anxiety,  $F(3, 211) = .994$ ,  $p = .397$ , thus  $H_2$  is rejected. Even though, the result indicated no statistical significant different in age categories however, the Mean distribution revealed that, 9 years old children demonstrated higher social anxiety based on the Mean score of  $57.11 \pm 12.15$ . Followed by children in age categories of 11 and 10 years old with the Mean scores of  $54.76 \pm 13.09$  and  $54.12 \pm 12.01$  respectively. Then lastly, children within the higher age category of 12 years have the lowest social anxiety due their Mean score of  $53.02 \pm 10.42$ . This finding is contrary to the previous studies (Al-Naggar, 2013; Beidel, 1998; Wittchen & Fehm, 2001) which found a prevalence of social anxiety among primary school age of less than 10 years. Similarly, Beidel et al. (2007), Inam et al. (2012b), Strauss and Last (1993) and Workman (2009)

have found higher social anxiety primary school pupils of age category of 8 years compared to the other age categories of 9 – 12 years respectively.

**Table 2:** ANOVA Test between Age Categories on Social Anxiety

Variable	n	Mean	SD	F	p
<b>Age Groups</b>				<b>.994</b>	<b>.397</b>
9 years old	44	57.11	12.15		
10 years old	58	54.12	12.01		
11 years old	55	53.02	10.42		
12 years old	58	54.76	13.09		

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper compared the gender and age differences in social anxiety amongst Iranian primary school children who live in Malaysia. Contrary to previous studies, the result has shown no significant differences in gender and age on social anxiety among the respondents which means, both males and females children who participated in this study did not differ significantly in terms of social anxiety rate. With regards to age also, the result of this study indicated no statistically significant difference in social anxiety. The findings in this study are in contrast with the previous research findings that show that children in lower age experience higher social anxiety. This inconsistency may be due to the fact that, the respondents are in the pre-adolescent stage.

#### IMPLICATION AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Identifying age and gender differences is vital especially for taking care of children who are suffering from social anxiety disorder. By recognizing the potential threat of social anxiety in early childhood makes it easy for intervention and treatment for the victims. The limitation of this study is, the sample of the study are Iranian children hence the result could not be generalized on the nationals. Similarly, the study was quantitative which did not have provision for in-depth investigation so, the researcher suggests a further study on qualitative approach.

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