

## Effect of Parental Anxiety on Problem Focused Coping Strategies of Over and Under Achiever High School Students differing in Test Anxiety

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### Abstract

*Present study is an attempt to figure out the effect of parental anxiety on the problem focused coping subterfuge of over and underachiever high school students differing in the levels of test anxiety. For attaining the objective a sample of N = 1600 were assessed with the help of Hundal General Mental Ability test and Academic achievement. In this manner two groups two comparable groups named as over-achiever and under-achiever were form. These groups were given Parental Anxiety Scale and Test anxiety scale so as to detect its level. In this manner a final sample of N = 160 students was selected from the aforementioned sample who were tested in coping strategies with the help of Cope Inventory. A 2×2×4 way ANOVA was used. Result revealed that the main effect of gender (A) was turned out to be statistically significant (F =138.100 , df =1, p<.01) indicating that regardless of their test and parental anxiety levels, the boys applied more problem focused coping strategies (M=45.53) in dealing with stressful circumstances as compared to the girl counterparts (M=36.53). Further, the main effect of test anxiety has also been turned out to be significant (F =46.567, df =1, P<.01) showing that irrespective of gender and parental anxiety the low test anxious subjects (M=43.19) preferred more problem focused coping as compared to their HTA counterparts (M=38.34). The significant main effect of gender (A) and test anxiety (B) is further qualified with A×B×C interaction (F =5.624, p<.05). Hence, the study is pioneer in nature that reflects the importance of parental and test anxiety in coping strategies of under and over achiever high school students of Himachal Pradesh.*

**Key Words:** Parental Anxiety, Test Anxiety, Coping Behavior, Gender, Underachievers High School Students

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### Introduction

While living in this modern fast-paced competitive world people have to confront diverse problems that become grave source of stress and anxiety that in the present scenario has become an inseparable part from human lives. A small amount of anxiety in the words of Spence however is motivating and helpful in promoting

La Dolce Vita an Epicurean philosophy of passing sweet and functional life. The level of anxiety when increases abruptly or with the passage of time starts interfering our day to day activity and academic performance (Zinta, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011). Same is the status of teachers and parental anxiety when students internalize affect them cognitively and behaviorally by

impairing their wellbeing. The positive parenting style may promote their global happiness and wellbeing whereas the anxious style may lead to devastating consequences on their behavior pattern and overall personality development of the school going children. In the last ten years, research on anxiety disorders has started to compile evidence to suggest an association between anxiety disordered parents, their parenting style and child anxiety problems. Lately one group of researches has speculated that if parenting styles were part of the mechanism for transmission of anxiety disorders, then over controlling and less warm parenting styles would be more prevalent amongst anxiety-disordered parents (Lindhout et.al, 2006).

The emotional climate in families with an anxious parent differs significantly from families without an anxious parent. In a study by Hopkin (2009) revealed that 65 percent of children living with an anxious parent showed signs of anxiety symptoms. Both top-down (Beidel & Turner, 1997; Weissman et al., 2005) and bottom-up research (Lieb et al., 2000; Messer & Beidel, 1994) revealed a relation between elevated levels of parental anxiety and depressive symptoms as well as elevated levels of childhood anxiety symptoms. Though psychiatric assessment and a self report childrearing questionnaire (Lindhaut et. al, 2006) found that a anxiety disordered mothers and fathers are significantly less nurturing (less warm) and more restrictive (over controlling) in their rearing styles than to non-disordered parents. Moreover, parental rejection fosters an insecure attachment potentially leading to anxiety disorders (Lindhout et.al, 2006). Very early research on parenting style or behaviors pointed to be a connection between these perceived parental practices and development of anxiety disorders (Arrindell et. al. 1983; Arrindell et.al,1989). Rapee's research showed

that parental over control and rejection were significantly related to children's anxiety symptoms (Rapee & Melville, 1997). Generally the risks of anxiety disorders appears particularly high in the off spring of anxious parents. Recent researchers have shown significant associations between parental psychological control and the presence of the anxiety symptoms and clinical anxiety disorders in children (Siqueland, Kendell & Steinberg, 1996).

Today, stress and anxiety has become an inevitable part of life and to keep our self calm and peaceful, we do make use of different types of coping strategies. Essentially taking an active role in our healing ('approach coping') is better than taking a passive role or avoiding the problem. Those are called avoidance coping and they keep us from healing more quickly (Bloks, et al. 2004). In a study by Ireland, Brown and Ballarini (2006) revealed that maladaptive personality traits were found to be associated with maladaptive coping and greater psychological distress. To make children dealt with life threatening situations effectually becomes mandatory for parents to foster positive coping skills in children. A stressful circumstance can be rendered considerably less stressful if one knows how to cope with it (Blona, 2005; Corbin & others, 2006; Greenberg, 2006). Coping with stress allows individuals to adopt and function in problematic situations, coping has become a central concept in psychology.

Traditional approaches to conceptualizing coping defined it in terms of relatively stable trait or some enduring behavior or characteristic of the person (Stone, Greenberg, Kenndy, Moore & Newman, 1991). In general, coping researchers agree that the study of coping is fundamental to an understanding of how stress affects people for better and for worse. According to Snyder &

Pulvers (2001) coping reflects thinking, feelings or action so as to preserve a satisfied psychological state when it is threatened. A stressful circumstance can be rendered considerably less stressful if you know how to cope with it (Blonna, 2005; Corbin and others, 2006; Greenberg, 2006). According to Santrock (2006) coping involves managing taxing circumstances expending effort to solve life's problems, seeking to master or reduce stress. Hence, coping is central to the stress process and its additional outcomes. Folkman & Lazarus (1984) classified coping strategies in to two categories: 1) Emotion-focused coping and 2) Problem-focused coping. Emotion -focused coping is characterized by the conscious regulation of emotions. It typically includes accepting responsibility, positive reappraisals, acceptance, denial and/or cognitive or behavioral avoidance or distraction (Kliewer, 1991; Sandler et.al., 1994). In contrast, problem-focused coping attempts to manage the stressful problems or situations. The most common problem-focused coping strategies include active coping, direct problem solving and planning (e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Sandler, Tein, & West, 1994).

By achievement we mean proficiency of performance generally measured by standardized test, for the act of attaining an end or carrying out a purpose. In the realm of educational measurement, the most meaningful achievement is certainly academic achievement. Academic achievement means knowledge understanding or skills acquired after instructions and training in courses of subjects of study. It is generally measured by means of total marks of students obtained by them in a particular examination. The academic achievement of an individual is considered to be influenced in part by his/her ability to make adjustments to his/her environment, in part by his/her special abilities, intellectual and

aptitudes which are integral part of his/her personality and in part by the intensity of drives and motives which serves as the impelling focus for his/her activities. It is considered to be one of the most important factors in life as the future planning for higher studies or the vocational choices depends upon the outcome of the students' marks or grades. Academic underachievement is defined as the inability to perform up to one's potential or accepted level of performance (Mandel & Sander, 1988). According to Paul (2006) school under achievement and academic failure are important problems that require evaluation there can be serious physical or psychological disorder underlying these problems. Parents of high-achieving students seem to utilize an authoritative parenting style more often than parents of low-achieving students (Taylor, 1994). Parents of underachievers often tend to be overly lenient or overly strict (Pendarvis, Howley, & Howley, 1990; Weiner, 1992). By contrast, families of underachieving students may tend to be more restrictive and punishment-oriented (Clark, 1983).

Tests are increasingly used in evaluating applicants for jobs and for admission into academic courses, with the consequence that examination stress and test anxiety have become increasingly pervasive problems in modern society. Test anxiety is a type of anxiety that can affect a test taker before, during or after a test. It is an issue that many students deal with at one time or another. Hong (1998) claimed that test anxiety is a complex multi dimensional construct involving cognitive, affective, physiological and behavioral reactions to evaluative situations. . Test-anxiety reduces the performance of those who experience it (Sarason, 1980). In addition it causes emotional suffering (Ben Dov, 1992). A somewhat different viewpoint was presented by Einat (2000), who claimed that severe test-anxiety is

caused by high personal standards of persons who expect maximum success and are afraid that they cannot meet their own standards. It has been proven that test -anxious students see the test situation as threatening and often react by worrying and thinking irrelevant thoughts that interfere with effective performance (Liebert & Morris, 1967; Tobias, 1985; Wine, 1982). When the characteristics of anxiety are linked academic or evaluative situation, we speak of test anxiety (Sud & Sud, 1997; Sud, 2001).

On the basis of the empirical literature, it is clear that test anxiety is associated with reduced student grade point average (GPA). Test anxiety has been identified by many undergraduate and graduate students as an important problem they want help in dealing with (Bishop, Bauer & Becker, 1998; Gallagher, Golin & Kelleher, 1992). High test anxious have been found to be more self-preoccupied and self-dissatisfied than low test anxious individuals (Sarason, 1980, 1991; Wine, 1980). Yousefi, Talib, Mansor, Juhari & Redzuan (2010) performed a study to determine the relationship between test-anxiety and academic. In a series of study Zinta (2006, 07, 08, 09, 10, 11) also observed detrimental role of anxiety in performance and wellbeing. The present study therefore intends to assess the impact of test and parental anxiety on the coping strategies. The methodology is as follows:-

### **Method**

#### **Study Area and Sample**

The present study has been conducted amongst the school students of Himachal Pradesh. Initially, 1600 students (boys and girls) from 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> classes were administered Hundal General Mental Ability Test (GMAT) to know their level of intelligence. Their academic scores of previous year were also taken from school records in terms of percentage. On the basis of these two scores i.e. intelligence raw score and academic

achievement score, a regression line was drawn to divide them into two groups i.e. underachievers and overachievers. Students who fell above the regression line were designated as overachievers and who fell below the regression line were known as underachievers. These students were given test anxiety and parental anxiety to perform. Finally N = 160 sample was selected from the aforesaid preliminary sample. In all 16 groups with N = 10 were formed by presenting parents and test anxiety scale to each gender i.e. for boys and girls that comprises of aforesaid total sample.

#### **Design of the Study**

A factorial design of 2×2×4 was used to study the main effect and interaction effect of 2 levels of students' test anxiety (high & low), 2 levels of gender ( boys & girls), and the 4 levels of parental anxiety (both parents high anxious, both parents low anxious, only father high anxious and only mother high anxious) on the dependent variable coping behavior of underachievers. These students were assessed with the below mentioned measures.

#### **Measures**

- Demographic Profile: It was used to collect information about demographic variables such as name, age, gender, class, father's name and mother's name etc.
- General Mental Ability Test (Hindi Version of Hundal's General Mental Ability Test): It was developed by P.S. Hundal of Punjab University in 1962. It is a verbal group test, designed to measure "General mental Ability" of school children. The tests consists of 100 tests items for the various subtests to be solved within 20 minutes in class room setting. The test was used to know the intelligence level of students. Test- retest reliability coefficients range from  $r = .87$  to  $r = .90$  for different class groups.

- **Test Anxiety Inventory (Hindi) (TAI-H)** Sud & Sud (1997): The inventory contains 20 items / statements regarding what students generally think about examinations. It consists of two sub scales for measuring “worry” and “emotionality” having 8 items in each sub scale but for the present study total score was taken excluding “worry” and “emotionality score”. There are four buffer items in the scale.

- **State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI)** (Developed by Spielberger, Gorsuch and Lushene): The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) is comprised of separate self-report scale for measuring two distinct anxiety concepts –State Anxiety (A-State) and Trait Anxiety (A-Trait). The A-State scale consists of 20 statements but the instructions require subjects to indicate how they feel at a particular moment in time. The STAI, A-Trait scale also consists of 20 statements that ask people to describe how they generally feel. The test –retest reliability (stability) of the STAI; A-Trait scale is relatively high ranging from .73 to .86 for males and .77 to .76 for females. But for the STAI A-State scale it tends to be .54 to .33 to males and .31 to .16 for females. Both A–Trait and A-State scales have a high degree of internal consistency. Alpha reliability of the STAI A-State range from .83 to .92 and for A-Trait range from .86 to .92 for high school and college students.

- **Cope Inventory (Brief Cope)** (Carver, 1997): The brief cope scale is a multidimensional coping inventory developed to assess a broad range of people's coping response to stress (Carver, 1997). This measure is an abbreviated version of the cope inventory (Carver, Scheier & weintraub, 1989). It comprises of 28 items having 4- point rating scale ranging from 1(I usually don't do this at all) to 4 ( I usually do this a lot). There are 2 items in each of the 14 sub-scales, for the present study these scales were further clubbed into Problem Focused Coping and Emotion Focused Coping.

Cronbach's Alpha Reliability for college students range from .45 to .92 for all these sub scales and test –retest reliability range from .42 to .89. Subscale coefficient alphas range from .50 to .90, with nine .65 (Carver, 1997).

### **Procedure**

The present study has been conducted in the school students of Himachal Pradesh. Initially, 1600 students (boys and girls) from 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> classes were administered Hundal General Mental Ability Test (GMAT) to know their level of intelligence. Their academic scores of previous year were also taken from school records in terms of percentage. On the basis of these two scores i.e. intelligence raw score and academic achievement score, a regression line was drawn to divide them into two groups i.e. underachievers and overachievers. Students who fell above the regression line were designated as overachievers and who fell below the regression line were known as underachievers. These students were given test anxiety and parental anxiety to perform. Finally N = 160 sample was selected from the aforesaid preliminary sample. In all 16 groups with N = 10 were formed by presenting parents and test anxiety scale to each gender i.e. for boys and girls. These group of subjects were given cope inventory to fill in up in order to understand their coping strategies. Necessary instructions were issued to the students in a very lucid language. Initially the students were welcomed by the researcher and later they were informed about the purpose of the study. After seeking necessary permission from the principle subject were assessed with the help of ANOVA whose description is as follows:-

**Results and Discussion****Table 1**

**Summary of 2×2×4, ANOVA for the Effect of Gender ( two levels), Test Anxiety ( two levels) and Parental Anxiety (four levels) on Problem Focused Coping Strategies (Active Coping, Instrumental Social Support, Positive Reframing, Planning, Acceptance, Self-distraction and Behavior Disengagement)**

also proved the fact that children differ markedly in respect to coping with stressful events and gender difference have also been noticed in coping strategies. Men and women have been found to differ markedly from each other in terms of their coping behavior. Ramya and Parthasarathy (2009) carried out a study to examine the coping patterns followed by the junior college students. The study findings

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Gender (A)	3285.156	1	3285.156	138.100	<.01
Test Anxiety (B)	1107.756	1	1107.756	46.567	<.01
Parental Anxiety (C)	121.619	3	40.540	1.704	n.s.
Gender × Test Anxiety (A×B)	3.906	1	3.906	.164	n.s.
Gender × Parental Anxiety (A×C)	152.469	3	50.823	2.136	n.s.
Test Anxiety × Parental Anxiety (B×C)	96.769	3	32.256	1.356	n.s.
Gender × Test Anxiety × Parental Anxiety (A×B×C)	401.319	3	133.773	5.624	<.01
Total	278293.000	159			

As it is apparent from the analysis (Table 1) that the main effect of gender (A) has turned out to be statistically significant ( $F=138.10$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.01$ ) indicating that regardless of their test anxiety level (B) and parental anxiety, boys use problem focused coping strategies ( $M=45.53$ ) in dealing with stressful circumstances more than their girl counterparts ( $M=36.53$ ). Many studies around the world have

revealed that male students mostly used problem-focused coping strategies, supporting the finding of the present study where boys used more active coping than girls. **Matud (2004)** also observed that women were lower on rational coping and men were having more emotional inhibition (see also Enzlinac, Mathieub, Demyttenaereac (2002). Ptacek, Smith and Zanas (1992) observed that boys use

more active coping (problem focused) because boys are generally more practical, stronger and they are more likely to view 'problems' as challenges whereas females tend to view them as harmful or threatening. Peterson, Sarigiani & Kennedy (1991) also report that boys experience the change as a challenge and develop active coping strategy while girls often withdraw and take a resigned attitude. There are various studies which shows that boys use more Problem Focused Coping strategies than girls (Ramya & Parthasarathy, 2009; **Matud, 2004**; Enzlinac, et.al. 2002, Ptacek et. al.,1992, Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

The main effect of test anxiety (B) has also turned out to be significant ( $F = 46.567, df = 1, P < .01$ ) showing that irrespective of gender (A) and parental anxiety (C), LTA subjects ( $M = 43.19$ ) prefer to use problem focused coping more as compared to their HTA counterparts ( $M = 38.34$ ). The significant main effect of gender (A) and test anxiety (B) is further qualified with  $A \times B \times C$  interaction ( $F = 5.624, df = 1, p < .05$ ). Test anxiety is multidimensional construct that has been defined as "the set of phenomenological, physiological and behavioral responses that accompany concern about possible negative consequences or failure on an exam or similar evaluative situation (Zeidner, 1998). Moreover, high test anxious people hold negative view of themselves and are often more self-criticizing plus worried about others reactions. High test anxious have been found to be more self-preoccupied and self-dissatisfied than low test anxious individuals (Sarason, 1980, 1991; Wine, 1980). In addition, Sarason (1984) and Keoghi, Bond, French, Richards & Davis (2004) found that test- anxiety decreases attention span, memory and concentration. Test anxiety not only affects the test-taking experience itself, it may even cause avoidant behavior and the student may avoid studying or preparing for exams (Gardner,

2010). Veenman, Kerseboom, & Imthorn (2000) observed that low anxiety testers can calmly think about steps and processes to solve a problem. Low Test Anxious individuals are more focused on task, active, task oriented, high in self-efficacy and have behavioral, problem solving cognitions (Sarason, 1980). Thus it is quite obvious that why LTA students are using more Problem Focused Coping strategies. Cohen, Miri; Ben-Zur, Hasida; Rosenfeld, Michal (2008) observed that problem-focused coping contributed positively to performance of college students. On the other hand, the main effect of parental anxiety (C), interaction between two levels of gender and two levels of test anxiety i.e.,  $A \times B$ , interaction between two levels of test anxiety and four levels of parental anxiety i.e.,  $B \times C$  and interaction between two levels of gender and four levels of parental anxiety i.e.,  $A \times C$  have not turned out to be significant. Boys have been observed to be using more Problem Focused Coping as compared to girls (Ramya & Parthasarathy, 2009., **Matud, 2004.**, Enzlinac, et.al. 2001., *Ptacek et. al., 1992*, **Landis, Harden, Malinowski, Grant, Carleton and Ford** 2007). Females are more likely to assess a situation more threatening and perceive themselves more negatively & pessimistically (Gjerde & Block, 1991). Many studies have reported that generally women use more Emotion Focused Coping strategies like avoiding the stress situations, expressing emotions and becoming depressed (Billings & Moos, 1984; Gilbert & Holahan, 1982). Thus, it was expected that regardless of level of parental anxiety and test anxiety, boys will be using more active coping (Problem Focused Coping) as it requires directly acting towards to eliminate the stressor.

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