



Impact of Social Anxiety on Self Actualization

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Abstract

This Paper examine the significant impact of social anxiety on the process of self-actualization, a fundamental aspect of human development. Social anxiety, characterized by an intense fear of social situations and negative evaluation, poses substantial barriers to self-discovery and personal growth, particularly during critical developmental stages like adolescence and early adulthood. The paper examines how social anxiety limits opportunities, building self-confidence, achieving personal goals, and engaging in social interactions crucial for identity formation. It also looks at the relationship between social anxiety disorder (SAD) and its broader implications, such as increased risk of comorbidity mental disorders and impaired interpersonal relationships. The paper also identifies cognitive and behavioral processes that maintain social anxiety and hinder self-actualization. Effective interventions, cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness practices, and social skills training, are discussed as strategies to help individuals overcome these barriers and fully realize their potential. By addressing the symptoms of social anxiety and enhancing social competence, the paper emphasizes the importance of targeted interventions in facilitating self-actualization and promoting a more fulfilling and meaningful life.

Keywords: Social anxiety, Self-actualization and Interventions.

Introduction

Social anxiety can hinder self-actualization by creating barriers to personal growth, as individuals may struggle to express themselves, pursue their goals, or build meaningful connections due to fear of judgment and social rejection. Self-actualization can be said to be the process of realizing one's potentials and become the best version of self. It is a fundamental aspect of human development. However, self-actualization can be hindered by some barriers such as social anxiety. Social anxiety on its own is characterized by an intense fear of social situation and bad judgment which can impeded on a person's individual path to self-actualization. During crucial developmental stages, such as adolescence and early adulthood, social anxiety can create significant barriers to self-discovery and personal growth, preventing individuals from engaging in experiences that are essential for building self-confidence and achieving personal goals. This anxiety not only affects social relationships but also limits opportunities for professional and academic achievements, further inhibiting the process of self-actualization. Therefore this paper aims to understand the impact of social anxiety on self-actualization

Social Anxiety

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) as one of the most prevalent mental diseases, encompasses both social phobia and traditional forms (such as public speaking anxiety, performance anxiety, interaction anxiety) of social anxiety. People with social anxiety feel fear and anxiousness in social performance and interpersonal communication situations, which has a significant negative impact on a variety of aspects of their lives. Moreover, Social anxiety increases the risk of developing major depressive disorder and has a high comorbidity rate with other mental disorders (APA, 2022). Social anxiety is the third most

prevalent mental illness in the world that develops when a person must connect with others as needed. It typically starts in the early to mid-teens, but it can also start in younger children or adults and includes fear, anxiety, and avoidance that interferes with daily tasks, such as working or attending university, as well as other activities (Ahmed, 2023).

Several explanations have been provided to understand the factors that contribute to the development, triggering and continuation of social anxiety. A good example is the cognitive/behavioral processes that detect and eliminate social-evaluative threat, but which ultimately result in the maintenance of the threat value of social-evaluative stimuli (Wong et al., 2021). This in turn maintains maladaptive social-evaluative beliefs and the experience of anxiety in social situations. Within the model, the cognitive and behavioral processes specified can occur before, during, or after social situations (Clark & Wells, 2020). The model further explain that individuals with social anxiety often view social situations with self-focus and attention towards threat in the environment, (Heimbeal, 2019; Wong et al., 2021); anticipatory processing and post-event processing, (Heimberg et al., 2020), and safety behaviors Wong et al., 2021).

However, in Maslow's explanation of personality he believe that individuals strive to attain their best potentials after fulfilling their basic needs in his theory of need. He proposed that adequate self-concept, regard or esteem will motivate individual to strive for self actualization (Maslow, 1962). From this perspective, several concepts were outlined for self actualization and this includes: Creative Spirit, Acceptance, Equanimity, Authenticity, Purpose, Peak Experiences, Truth Seeking, Good Moral intuition, Humanitarianism, and Continued freshness of appreciation (Kaufman, 2018).

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) reveals both the complexities of the condition and the challenges associated with its diagnosis, treatment, and societal perception. While SAD is a widely recognized and well-researched mental health disorder, several aspects of its conceptualization, impact, and management warrant critical examination.

One of the primary concerns regarding SAD is its diagnostic criteria, which some argue can be overly broad. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) outlines specific criteria for SAD, including a marked fear of social situations where the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny by others. However, these criteria can sometimes blur the line between normal social anxiety and pathological anxiety. Many people experience some degree of nervousness or discomfort in social situations, but not all of these experiences constitute a disorder. The risk of over-diagnosis is particularly concerning because it can lead to the pathologization of normal behavior, contributing to unnecessary medicalization and treatment. Critics argue that by categorizing a wide range of social discomforts under SAD, the DSM-5 may inadvertently label individuals as mentally ill when their experiences may simply reflect typical human variability in social comfort levels (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007)

Self-actualization

Self-actualization is known to exert important implications form the side of ethics and system of humanistic psychology. Self-actualization is an educative and it is concerned with the person's living of good life, and distinctive development (Gopinath, 2020). Self-actualization is a direct experiencing rather than a system of conceptualized structures and self-actualization give emphasis to process of unfolding the self, where by the individual to understand inborn potentialities. Self-actualization denotes the ability and the desirability of the individuals to initiate and withstand in a particular action, with no support of others. Individual who has realistic aims for himself, who has been studying skills and thinking, and confidence are more successful and possess strong self-respect in attaining Self-Actualization than the others (Gopinath, 2020). Many researchers inferred that people form relatively lower income classes, accept what they have, however, they do not have the thirst of achieving their

goals. And the self-actualization is prominently influenced by the demographic variables and the level of emotional intelligence of the individual. Self-Actualization also founded a powerful linkage of the several aspects in Job Involvement and Organizational Commitment. Compare with Self-Actualization, Organizational Commitment highly correlated with Job involvement, but also demonstrated strong associations with varied facets of Ryff's (1989) constructed the theory of psychological happiness such as positive relations, self-acceptance, autonomy, personal growth, purpose, and environmental mastery. Conversely, Self-actualization was powerfully linked with the unity sense of the self-transcendent knowledge, but not the intelligence of loss of personality (Gopinath, 2020). This additional granular decision, within the sphere of influence to self-transcendence supports. Maslow confirmed that Self-Actualization persons are able to paradoxically merge with a common humanity while at the same time able to maintain a strong identity and sense of self.

However, the above concept has some worrisome aspect for its vagueness and lack of empirical grounding. Critics argue that self-actualization is difficult to define and measure objectively. While Maslow provided descriptions of self-actualized individuals, such as their creativity, autonomy, and problem-solving abilities, these characteristics are somewhat abstract and subjective. This makes it challenging to establish clear criteria for what constitutes self-actualization, leading to ambiguity in both research and practical applications (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Moreover, the lack of empirical evidence supporting the hierarchical structure of Maslow's needs has led some to question the validity of the concept. Subsequent research has shown that the fulfillment of higher-level needs, like self-actualization, does not necessarily depend on the satisfaction of lower-level needs, such as physiological or safety needs (Wahba & Bridwell, 2016). Moreover, another critique centers on the elitist implications of self-actualization. The concept suggests that only a select few individuals can achieve this highest level of personal development, often those with certain privileges such as education, socioeconomic status, and access to resources. This perspective can be seen as exclusionary, as it implies that self-actualization is out of reach for individuals who struggle with basic needs or who live in environments that do not support personal growth. This has led some to argue that Maslow's concept is culturally biased, reflecting the values and experiences of Western, middle-class individuals rather than being universally applicable (Sugarman, 2018). Furthermore, the concept of self-actualization is critiqued for its potential to foster a sense of individualism that may be at odds with collective well-being. In focusing on personal fulfillment and self-growth, the concept may inadvertently promote a self-centered approach to life, where the needs and desires of the individual take precedence over those of the community or society. This can conflict with cultural values that emphasize interdependence, community, and social harmony (Fromm, 2019).

In my view, the criticism of self-actualization's ambiguity is legitimate, but the lack of factual support does not render the notion obsolete. Rather, it emphasises the need for a more nuanced and comprehensive definition of self-actualization. According to my views and interactions, self-actualization emerges widely among persons and civilisations. For example, a socially nervous person may define success as overcoming the fear of starting a conversation rather than obtaining celebrity or notoriety. These little, deeply personal wins can be big steps towards their own kind of self-actualization.

On the issue of Maslow's hierarchy, I agree that satisfying lower-level wants sequentially does not always lead to self-actualization. Life frequently resists linearity. I've met people who, despite financial hardship or adversity, find great significance and progress in creative expression, strong interpersonal relationships, or spiritual practices. This strengthens the notion that self-actualization is not a privilege reserved for the wealthy, but rather a potential available to anybody, even those facing difficulties.

The critique of cultural bias and elitism is very effective. Maslow's notion may reflect a Western, individualistic attitude, yet this does not diminish its significance. Instead, it advocates for adaptation. For example, in collectivist civilisations, self-actualization may prioritise communal or familial responsibilities over personal goals. In such situations, social anxiety may be viewed as a hindrance not just to personal development but also to performing society obligations, emphasising the need for culturally specific therapies. Finally, I understand the contradiction between individualism and collective well-being. While the pursuit of self-actualization may appear self-centred, I believe it can connect with collective aims when considered in a broader context. A self-actualized individual is often better equipped to contribute meaningfully to society, whether by fostering innovation, building stronger relationships, or inspiring others. Addressing social anxiety, for instance, empowers individuals to participate in communal life more effectively, strengthening both the individual and the collective.

Impact of Social Anxiety on Self Actualization

The impact of social anxiety on self-actualization is profound, affecting various aspects of an individual's life, particularly in the realm of personal growth and identity development. Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is characterized by an intense fear of social situations and negative evaluation, leading individuals to worry excessively about being judged by others. This fear, although often perceived as irrational by the individuals themselves, is not entirely unfounded. Research suggests that people who interact with socially anxious individuals often exhibit less liking towards them, avoid eye contact, and tend to dominate conversations, which can reinforce the fears and anxieties of those with social anxiety (Leary & Kowalski, 2020).

These social dynamics have a significant impact on the quality of interpersonal relationships, which are crucial for self-actualization. Interpersonal relationships are strong predictors of various health outcomes, including psychological well-being and life satisfaction. Individuals with social anxiety disorder often report increased interpersonal impairment, which can hinder their ability to form and maintain satisfying relationships. Satisfying friendships, which are typically associated with a stronger sense of well-being, greater emotional adjustment, higher levels of self-worth, social competence, and self-esteem, are often out of reach for those with social anxiety (Ranta et al., 2021). Furthermore, people who maintain successful friendships are more likely to utilize adaptive coping strategies and exhibit greater self-control, both of which are indicative of a higher quality of life. However, the avoidance behavior typical of social anxiety can severely limit the formation of such relationships.

Social anxiety disorder is also associated with fewer self-reported friendships and romantic relationships. This lack of social connections can further impede the process of self-actualization, as social interactions play a crucial role in exploring and affirming various aspects of one's identity. For instance, individuals with social anxiety often struggle to form a coherent and positive sense of self due to their persistent fears of judgment and rejection. This condition can lead to a cycle of avoidance and distress during valued social interactions, further reducing relationship satisfaction in the few relationships they do maintain. The fear of intimacy that often accompanies social anxiety can also prevent individuals from forming close personal relationships, which are essential for emotional support and self-discovery (Moscovitch et al., 2021).

The avoidance of social interactions not only limits the opportunities for self-exploration but also impedes the development of an authentic identity. Adolescence is a particularly critical period for identity formation, and social anxiety can significantly impact this developmental stage. Adolescents with social anxiety may experience limited opportunities for self-exploration and social validation, leading to the adoption of negative

self-perceptions and a sense of incompetence in social roles. The fear of negative judgment often causes individuals with social anxiety to conform excessively to social expectations, which can stifle the development of an authentic sense of self and hinder the process of self-actualization (Ranta et al., 2021).

Moreover, the sense of belonging to the social world is one of the fundamental psychological needs that enhances psychological well-being. Social connectedness is a key factor in predicting both psychological and physical health outcomes. According to social identity theory, a person's social identity is closely related to the groups they identify with, which provide a psychologically meaningful description of the self. Social anxiety, characterized by the fear of social situations and negative evaluation, can significantly disrupt this process by preventing individuals from fully engaging with social groups that are essential for identity formation (Leary & Kowalski, 2020).

Individuals with social anxiety are often hypersensitive to external feedback, which can further complicate their identity development. This heightened sensitivity may lead to a reliance on external validation, making it difficult for individuals to develop a stable and positive self-concept. The constant fear of negative judgment can cause individuals to suppress their true thoughts and feelings in favor of conforming to social expectations. This behavior, while seemingly protective in the short term, can ultimately prevent the individual from achieving self-actualization, as it restricts the expression of their true self (Moscovitch et al., 2021).

The physical symptoms associated with social anxiety, such as rapid heart rate, nausea, and sweating, can also contribute to the challenges of self-actualization. These symptoms, which can escalate into full-blown panic attacks, are often triggered by feared social situations. Despite recognizing that their fears are excessive and unreasonable, individuals with social anxiety often feel powerless against their anxiety. This sense of helplessness can further reinforce avoidance behaviors, making it even more difficult for individuals to engage in the social interactions necessary for personal growth and self-discovery (Leary & Kowalski, 2020).

In addition to the direct impact on interpersonal relationships and identity formation, social anxiety also has broader implications for an individual's overall quality of life. Social networks, or the lack thereof, have been shown to affect earlier mortality rates, underscoring the importance of social connections for physical health. Individuals with social anxiety disorder are at a greater risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation, which can have serious consequences for both mental and physical health. The lack of social support can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression, further hindering the process of self-actualization (Moscovitch et al., 2021). The chronic nature of social anxiety disorder means that its impact on self-actualization can be long-lasting. Without intervention, individuals with social anxiety may find it increasingly difficult to engage in the social interactions that are necessary for personal growth. Effective interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness practices, and social skills training, can help individuals overcome the barriers posed by social anxiety and move closer to achieving self-actualization. By addressing the cognitive and behavioral processes that maintain social anxiety, these interventions can help individuals build self-confidence, improve social competence, and develop a more positive and coherent sense of self (Leary & Kowalski, 2020; Ranta et al., 2021).

Way Forward/Recommendations

Intervention strategy via CBT

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a well-established approach for addressing the negative impacts of social anxiety. The intervention begins with psychoeducation, where clients learn about social anxiety, its symptoms, and how cognitive distortions contribute to their fears. Key components include cognitive restructuring, which helps individuals identify and challenge maladaptive thoughts, such as "Everyone is judging me," replacing them with more balanced and realistic perspectives (Wolitzky-Taylor & LeBeau, 2023).

According to Kindred et al (2020), behavioural techniques include gradually exposing dreaded social situations, beginning with less daunting events and moving to more difficult ones. For example, a customer might start by making small chat with a store clerk and progress to giving a presentation at work. These exposures are intended to lessen avoidance behaviours and desensitise the client to anxiety-provoking circumstances. He further explained that mindfulness and relaxation techniques are also integrated to help clients manage physiological symptoms of anxiety. Clients learn deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and grounding exercises to calm their bodies and remain present during social interaction. Also, he stated that role-playing and social skills training further support the development of confidence in social settings. Practicing these skills in a safe, therapeutic environment allows clients to gain mastery and reduce their fear of rejection. Recent studies continue to support the efficacy of CBT for social anxiety disorder. Finally he gave an example on, a meta-analysis which found out that patients continue to improve after treatment, indicating long-term benefits of CBT. Similarly, Wolitzky-Taylor and LeBeau (2023) highlighted that CBT remains the gold-standard psychotherapy for social anxiety disorder, with both individual and group settings showing effectiveness. By combining these features, CBT creates a structured framework for lowering social anxiety and enables individuals to manage social situations more effectively. These findings highlight the significance of CBT as a holistic therapy method that addresses both the cognitive and behavioural aspects of social anxiety, allowing for considerable and long-term improvements in individuals' social functioning and quality of life..

Intervention Strategy Via Kaufamn's Concept

Kaufman's (2018) concepts—Creative Spirit, Acceptance, Equanimity, Authenticity, Purpose, Peak Experiences, Truth Seeking, Good Moral Intuition, Humanitarianism, and Continued Freshness of Appreciation—offer a holistic approach to fostering resilience and growth in individuals with social anxiety. These principles can be integrated into the intervention strategy to cultivate self-actualization and mitigate the negative impacts of social anxiety.

First, *Acceptance and Equanimity* enable people to accept their flaws and approach social relationships with a balanced perspective. Clients can reduce their fear of judgment by cultivating self-compassion and minimizing self-criticism. *Authenticity and Purpose* assist clients in aligning their behaviors with their underlying values, resulting in a sense of fulfillment that goes beyond outward validation. Purpose-driven activities, such as volunteering or pursuing hobbies, can redirect attention from self-consciousness to meaningful engagement with the world. Encouraging a *Creative Spirit* encourages clients to express themselves in ways that feel safe and satisfying, whether via art, writing, or other creative outlets. This develops a sense of accomplishment and prevents social retreat. *Peak*



encounters and Continued Freshness of Appreciation encourage clients to relish moments of delight and connection, even in little doses, which reinforces positive social encounters. This promotes thankfulness while reducing the emphasis on potential negative outcomes. Finally, *truth seeking and good moral intuition* lay the groundwork for developing meaningful relationships based on shared values and empathy. Individuals who embrace humanitarian values can change their focus away from fear of judgment and toward constructively contributing to their communities, increasing both self-esteem and social confidence.

Conclusion

The deep impact of social anxiety on self-actualization emphasises the importance of studying and treating this condition in order to increase human capacity. The strong fear of social circumstances, as well as the negative appraisal associated with social anxiety, greatly limits individuals' ability to fully engage in experiences important for self-discovery and personal development. This avoidance not only restricts prospects for developing a cohesive and positive identity, but it also stifles personal and professional growth. As a result, individuals with social anxiety frequently suffer a decreased sense of self-worth and struggle to realise their strengths and objectives. Drawing on the discussion in this paper, it is clear that the barriers erected by social anxiety go beyond acute pain, altering long-term trajectories of self-actualization and achievement. Avoidance behaviours perpetuate a cycle in which lost opportunities reinforce feelings of inadequacy, further isolating people from their potential. These findings underline the importance of tailored interventions in interrupting the cycle. Cognitive-behavioral therapy, exposure therapy, mindfulness techniques, and social skills training are all effective strategies for alleviating social anxiety. These treatments not only alleviate symptoms, but also enable people to participate more actively in their lives. Individuals are better able to pursue experiences that promote self-actualization if their social competence and fear are improved.

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