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**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LEVELS OF EMPATHY,
SELF-CONFIDENCE AND ANXIETY**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between the levels of empathy, self-confidence and social anxiety in young people with higher education. Empathy is an essential socio-emotional ability for efficiently building interpersonal relationships; it contributes to the development of a correct and positive self-image of an individual, while significantly influencing his/her self-esteem. Social anxiety, another fundamental concept of the present study, is significantly influenced by the personal experiences of an individual, together with his/her self-esteem. The participants selected for this study were 140 young people, first- and second-year students at faculties of social sciences. The methods used for this study were three questionnaires designed to analyse the three concepts under discussion: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire and the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale. The response format of all the questionnaires is a Likert-type scale. The data collected after applying the questionnaires were introduced into SPSS Statistics and processed using descriptive statistics, the *t* test for independent samples and Pearson's correlation coefficient. The results of the study have shown the confirmation of the initial hypotheses, according to which there is a statistically significant correlation between the levels of empathy and self-confidence and a statistically significant negative correlation between empathy and social anxiety in students with higher education.

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Keywords: Empathy, self-confidence, anxiety, socio-emotional balance.



1. Introduction

The three main concepts referred to in the present study are empathy, self-confidence and anxiety.

The specialised literature provides various definitions for ‘empathy’, depending on which dimension of the concept under discussion is being highlighted. According to Stojiljković, Djigić, and Zlatković (2012, p. 962), empathy includes two key-components: the cognitive and the affective ones; the former refers to the ability of comprehending others’ feelings and putting oneself in their place, while the latter implies a proper emotional reaction to the emotional state of the others.

A definition which seems to include both of these dimensions is put forward by Molchanov (2014), who regards empathy as “the ability to feel with other and to understand and share his/her emotions” (p. 90). In terms of human relationships, empathy identifies itself with the “apprehension of another’s condition or state of mind without actually experiencing that person’s feelings” (Hogan, 1969, p. 308). Along the same line of thought, Keskin (2014) defines empathy as an “enabler for the individuals to see the positive and the good in people around them, [in their] effort to understand another person’s thoughts and feelings appropriately” (p. 4932). The same author nonetheless brings to the reader’s attention that empathy is not to be substituted with notions such as imitation, perspective-taking, understanding, identification etc., which might appear similar to empathy, but when taken solely, do not share its significance. Empathy, on the other hand, displays itself as a mechanism which can simultaneously involve all the aforementioned notions.

In regard to self-confidence, Perry (2011) considers it to be the capacity of an individual to appraise his/her strengths and qualities and to acknowledge his/her weaknesses without affecting his/her general state of well-being. The same author believes that, although self-confidence is a fluctuant condition which varies depending on the successes and failures of an individual, a self-confident person should not be significantly affected by all these variations. The notion of self-confidence has been often referred to in the specialised literature as the ability to deal with challenges, the determination in achieving one’s goal or the certainty of an upcoming accomplishment or success (Bell, 1967). These different facets of self-confidence are also similar to White’s view (2009), who states that self-confidence includes a series of components, such as optimism, perseverance and self-consciousness. In Cakir’s opinion (2012), self-confident individuals tend to put more effort into carrying out their goals and are more resistant to challenging situations. At the same time, self-confidence helps people in managing difficult situations, anger and aggressiveness (Woodman, Akehurst, Hardy, & Beattie, 2010). On the whole, for people in general and for the young in particular, self-confidence is an imperative trait for succeeding in both the professional and personal life, as it acts like an ‘engine’ that motivates and encourages individuals to be perseverant in achieving their objectives and patient when dealing with importunate external factors.

The third concept considered in the present study is ‘anxiety’, which, similarly to the first two notions described above, has numerous definitions in the specialised literature. For instance, anxiety can be regarded either as a feeling of tension triggered by a disquieting situation (Kazdin, 2000) or as “an alarm system [which is activated] whenever a person feels threatened” (Ticusan, 2014, p. 147). Anxiety is also defined as a “state characterised by an activation of the individual, which starts the physiological needs of the body, increasing his/her level of activation in answer to what he/she perceives as a threat” (Salavera, Antoñanzas, Noé, & Teruel, 2014, p. 578). Concurrently, Stomff (2014) states that anxiety is a reaction to

an extrinsic stimulus, which can be contained within reasonable boundaries if there is a balance between the external stimulations and the internal state. In other terms, anxiety can also be defined as the lack of equilibrium between the external stimuli and the internal response to these stimuli.

2. Problem Statement

Bringing all the forenamed concepts together and taking into consideration their effects and forms of emergence, we are legitimate to presume that, while empathy and self-confidence usually concur side by side in providing an individual's well-being and inner balance, a high level of anxiety may appear precisely as a result of their absence. Nonetheless, these hypotheses are yet to be confirmed.

3. Research Questions

H1. There is a statistically significant positive correlation between the levels of empathy and self-confidence in young people with higher education.

H2. There is a statistically significant negative correlation between the levels of empathy and social anxiety in young people with higher education.

H3. There are statistically significant differences between men and women in terms of empathy, self-confidence and social anxiety levels.

4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to analyse the relationship between empathy, self-confidence and social anxiety in young people with higher education. The second objective of this research is to identify the differences between genders in terms of empathy, self-confidence and social anxiety levels.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Subjects

The participants selected for this study were 140 young people aged between 20 and 25, who are currently attending higher education institutions (from three faculties at the University of Bucharest: Psychology, Law and History). The participants were divided into 70 male subjects and 70 female subjects. All the subjects were randomly selected. The participants were briefly instructed before applying and filling in the three questionnaires.

5.2. Materials

The method used for this research was the questionnaire-based investigation.

The first questionnaire applied to the participants is the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). The scale was developed in 1965 by the American sociologist Morris Rosenberg and was published in the same year in "Society and the Adolescent Self-Image", Princeton. The instrument includes 10 items answered on a Likert-type scale from 1 to 4. (Rosenberg, 1965).

The second questionnaire is the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), which was developed by Spreng, McKinnon, Mar and Levine, and was published in 2009. The questionnaire is a 16-item Likert-type scale (Spreng, McKinnon, Mar & Levine, 2009).

The third instrument is the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS) developed by Michael Liebowitz in 1987. The questionnaire is made up of 24 items, on a Likert-type scale from 0 to 3, on fear, anxiety and avoidance of situations (Liebowitz, 1987).

6. Findings

The collected data were entered into the SPSS statistical software. Due to the normal distribution of data, we were able to apply a Pearson correlation test, with the purpose of observing a statistically significant correlation between the levels of empathy, self-confidence and social anxiety.

Table 01. Descriptive statistics for empathy, anxiety and self-confidence

Group Statistics	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Empathy	140	55.07	5.338	.518
Anxiety	140	32.37	3.975	.594
Self-confidence	140	28.07	4.734	.565

Table 01 shows the descriptive statistics (number, mean, standard deviation) for each of the three concepts analysed in the present study. Considering the standard interpretation of the applied questionnaires, we are able to identify a high score for the ‘empathy’ and ‘self-confidence’ variables and a relatively low score of the ‘social anxiety’ variable.

With the purpose of testing the first hypothesis, we applied the Pearson parametric test for statistical correlation and we introduced the results for the corresponding variables into the SPSS. After having analysed Table 02, we could observe a statistically significant positive correlation between the levels of empathy and self-confidence in young people with higher education. A coefficient of .720 for the correlation between empathy and self-confidence allows us to confirm our first hypothesis. Thus, the young people who possess empathic abilities also have a high level of self-confidence, both variables leading to the development of a psycho-emotionally and socially balanced personality.

Table 02. Results for Pearson correlation between empathy and self-confidence

		Empathy	Self-confidence
Empathy	Pearson correlation	1	.720
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.041
	N	140	140
Self-confidence	Pearson correlation	.720	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.041	
	N	140	140

To confirm the second hypothesis, we applied the same parametric test for statistical correlation, i.e. the Pearson test, and we introduced the results for the ‘empathy’ and ‘social anxiety’ variables. After analysing Table 03, we can conclude that there is a statistically significant negative correlation between the levels of empathy and social anxiety in young people with higher education.

The negative coefficient of -.626 for the correlation between empathy and social anxiety allows us to confirm our second hypothesis. Therefore, young people with strong empathic abilities show a low level

of social anxiety, while empathy, together with self-esteem and self-confidence, contribute to the decrease of the levels of social anxiety or social fear and manage to shape a prosocial profile for any individual.

Table 03. Results for Pearson correlation between empathy and social anxiety

		Empathy	Social anxiety
Empathy	Pearson correlation	1	-.626
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.049
	N	140	140
Social anxiety	Pearson correlation	-.626	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.049	
	N	140	140

Table 04. Results for independent samples *t* test for unrelated data

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		<i>t</i>	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		F	Sig.			
Empathy	Equal variances assumed	.200	.656	2.649	68	.003
	Equal variances not assumed			2.649	67.07	.003
Anxiety	Equal variances assumed	.158	.692	2.764	68	.006
	Equal variances not assumed			2.764	67.09	.006
Self-confidence	Equal variances assumed	2.881	.176	.962	68	.060
	Equal variances not assumed			.962	67.04	.060

For the last hypothesis of the present research, we applied the *t* parametric test for independent samples. As it can be observed in Table 04, there are statistically significant differences between male and female subjects, but only in relation with two variables: empathy and social anxiety. Both for empathy and social anxiety, the higher scores belong to the female participants, which indicates that women show not only stronger empathic abilities than men, but also a higher level of anxiety.

7. Conclusion

Considering the results of the present research, we can conclude the following: the Romanian young people with higher education show strong empathic abilities, which help them understand and be aware of both their own emotional states and experiences and those of the others, and self-confidence, together with self-esteem, form the self-image of an individual.

In respect of the young, the confidence in their own strengths and abilities represents the key-element in becoming successful and achieving their goals. As we have identified a low level of social anxiety, we are entitled to believe that today's young people and tomorrow's adults will be psycho-emotionally balanced and free of any social fears or counterproductive self-restraints. The differences between men and

women in terms of empathy and anxiety allow identification of important characteristics for interpersonal relationships between them in order to make communication more efficient. The high level of anxiety identified in women could lead to new research directions in order to identify their personality characteristics in correlation with a high level of anxiety.

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