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# Gender Differences in Young Adults with Social Phobia

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### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. Authors NA and BD designed the study and wrote the protocol. Author NA performed the statistical analysis, authors NA and BD managed the literature search, and wrote, read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** To examine the gender differences in young adults with clinical manifestation of social phobia.

**Study Design:** analytical, cross-sectional cohort study

**Place and Duration of Study:** Psychiatric Hospital- Skopje, Centre for Mental Health-Centre, between January 2012 and June 2013

**Method:** The severity of social phobia was measured with the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN). The questionnaire was administered to 65 patients (age range 18 to 25, 53% female), diagnosed according to DSM-IV with social phobia, without co-morbidity of other mental disorders.

**Results:** Statistically significant differences between the examined groups (male and female) were found. These findings confirm that female young patients with social phobia are showing more severe fear and avoidant behaviour in speaking to anyone in authority, giving speeches, talking to people they don't know, activities in which they are the centre of attention, while male young patients with social phobia are showing more severe fear and avoidant behaviour if they are criticized, with statistical significance  $p < 0.01$ .

**Conclusion:** Female young adults with social phobia are showing more severe fear and avoidant behaviour if they assume that other people are looking and monitoring them, while male young adults are showing more severe fear and avoidant behaviour if they are criticized.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Social phobia is characterized by an intense fear reaction to wide range of social situations in which the person can be assessed negatively by others [1]. The prevalence varies from 4% to 16% [2,3,4], generally higher in female than in male patients, usually expressed in late adolescence [3,5,6]. In the last decade the inadequate treatment of the children, family conflicts and parents' criticism are seen as factors for social phobia in young adults [7,8,9,18], also the absence of warm relationship and emotional support are especially significant [7,11,12]. However, the most important factor is over-control and discipline, as well as the use of shame as a discipline method [7,8,9,12,13]. According to some authors girls have a higher propensity to be involved in family conflicts and that is one of the reasons for the greater incidence of social phobia in female adolescents [14], but they have different models in response than boys [15,16], which also creates some differences in the clinical manifestation in social phobia between male and female adolescents [17,18].

This research is implemented with an idea to examine sex differences in the manifestation of social phobia.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The research was conducted on 65 (31 male and 34 female) young adult patients (18 to 25 years old) in the Mental Health Center -"Center", Psychiatric Hospital -Skopje, Macedonia, diagnosed according to DSM-4 with social phobia, without co-morbidity of other mental disorders.

For the evaluation of the social phobia the Social Phobia Inventor (SPIN) was used, created by Connor KM, Davidson JR, Churchill LE, Sherwood A, Foa E, Weisler RH [19], translated in Macedonian, with reliability of 0.89, and validity of 0.87. This self-reported assessment scale consists of 17 items, which cover the main spectrum of social phobia such as fear, avoidance, and physiological symptoms. The statements of the SPIN items indicate the particular signs of social phobia. Answering the statements, a person should indicate how much each statement applies to him or her. Each statement of SPIN can be measured by a choice of five answers based on a scale of intensity of social phobia signs ranging from "Not at all" to "Extremely". Each answer is then assigned a number value ranging from "least intense" to "most intense". Overall assessment is done by total score, and the total score higher than 19 indicates likelihood of social anxiety disorder.

The statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 17.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Il., USA), and  $p < 0.05$  is taken as statistically significant. The results were analyzed by statistical methods (arithmetic mean, standard deviation, Independent samples test).

## **3. RESULTS**

The average age of the male respondents is 21.97 with SD 2.19 and of female respondents is 22.02 with SD 2.01. There are no statistically significant differences between the groups regarding age.

Regarding gender though, there were differences found concerning the clinical manifestation of social phobia. Females with social phobia show more severe fear and avoidant behavior in speaking to anyone in authority, giving speeches, talking to people they don't know, activities in which they are the centre of attention, while males are showing more severe fear and avoidant behavior if they are criticized with statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.01$ ). (Table 1).

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this research was to determine the differences in clinical manifestation between male and female young adults with social phobia. The results showed that male patients with social phobia have more severe fear and avoidant behavior if they are criticized while the female patients experience more severe fear and avoidant behavior when speaking to anyone in authority, giving speeches, talking to people they don't know, activities in which they are the centre of attention. Our findings are mostly in accordance with the results from previous researches. According to most researchers higher level of fear and avoidance in women is related to the importance of the traditional model of rearing girls [20,21]. On the other hand, higher level of fear and avoidance in the male group is in accordance to the psychological importance which is given to their masculinity and male social role [21]. They show vulnerability to situations of any assessment and a possible exposure to a danger [20,21]. Bruch and Cheek in their research noticed that shame is incompatible with traditional male gender roles [20]. Some authors point to the fact that female adolescents (adolescence is the usual significant period in the emergence of social phobia) show much more shame and are more dependent of their physical appearance and social competencies in comparison with male adolescents [21,22].

The tendency to interpret neutral social events in a negative way with critique, is a very important factor for emergence and maintenance of social phobia. Such a tendency actually leads to rejection and avoidant behavior in social interaction. Young adults with social phobia have decreased their attention for the current social situation, and possess a distorted and negative self-image about the evaluation from outside. Such a tendency is more pronounced in females, the females are still more exposed to estimations, especially in esthetical and social aspects [23]. On the other hand, male young adults with social phobia have shown higher level of fear and avoidance as a clinical manifestation if they are criticized or they assume that they will be criticized. These kind of social situations in a symbolic way are recognized by them as observation of their manhood and their competence as a man.

Such differences in clinical manifestation are linked to the specifics on the identification with different social roles for different gender. Mentioned differences in the clinical manifestations between male and female young adults with social phobia are especially important from the therapeutic aspect.

**Table 1. Clinical manifestation in male and female young adults with social phobia**

	<b>Male (M)</b>	<b>Male (SD)</b>	<b>Female (M)</b>	<b>Female (SD)</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
1. I am afraid of people in authority.	2.44	1.08	3.26	.73	3.543	7.522 x 10 <sup>-4</sup>
2. I am bothered by blushing in front of people.	3.15	.66	3.22	.80	.434	.666
3. Parties and social events scare me.	3.32	.77	3.29	.86	-.164	.870
4. I avoid talking to people I don't know.	1.88	1.01	3.26	.81	6.013	1.007 x 10 <sup>-7</sup>
5. Being criticized scares me a lot.	3.44	.66	1.97	.91	-7.507	2.596 x 10 <sup>-10</sup>
6. Fear of embarrassment causes me to avoid doing things or speaking to people.	2.00	1.13	3.22	.76	5.083	3.571 x 10 <sup>-6</sup>
7. Sweating in front of people causes me distress.	3.18	.83	3.19	.79	.084	.933
8. I avoid going to parties.	2.62	1.07	2.71	1.07	.346	.731
9. I avoid activities in which I am the centre of attention.	1.82	.90	3.19	.75	6.618	9.216 x 10 <sup>-9</sup>
10. Talking to strangers scares me.	2.03	1.14	3.48	.57	6.403	2.167 x 10 <sup>-8</sup>
11. I avoid having to give speeches.	2.03	.99	3.29	.90	5.321	1.455 x 10 <sup>-6</sup>
12. I would do anything to avoid being criticized.	3.50	.71	2.06	1.06	-6.465	1.697 x 10 <sup>-8</sup>
13. Heart palpitations bother me when I am around people.	2.53	1.13	2.48	1.15	-.161	.873
14. I am afraid of doing things when people might be watching.	2.88	1.09	2.77	1.12	-.394	.695
15. Being embarrassed or looking stupid are my worst fears.	2.20	1.07	2.39	1.14	.660	.511
16. I avoid speaking to anyone in authority.	1.73	.96	3.39	.76	7.622	1.633 x 10 <sup>-10</sup>
17. Trembling or shaking in front of others is distressing to me.	2.65	1.12	2.55	1.18	-.345	.731

#### **4.1 Future Directions**

In future studies, several methodological improvements seem warranted to progress in understanding the factors that impact social phobia. Future studies should be properly designed for the study of predictors with special attention on improved methodology and appropriate research designs. The development of positive self-image and identity seems to be an important factor that should be considered when planning treatment, so future studies should try to find the best methodology in social phobia treatment.

#### **4.2 Limitations**

Several methodological weaknesses of the study may be partly responsible for the limited knowledge, such as not having control group, which may bias some of the result.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Young adults with social phobia have decreased their attention for the current social situation, and possess a distorted and negative self-image about the evaluation from outside. Such a tendency is more pronounced in females, especially in esthetical and social estimations aspects. On the other hand, male young adults with social phobia have shown higher level of fear and avoidance as a clinical manifestation if they are criticized or they assume that they will be criticized.

#### **CONSENT**

Authors declare that written informed consent was obtained from the patient for publication of this report.

#### **ETHICAL APPROVAL**

Authors hereby declare that the research has been approved by the appropriate Institutional Ethical Board and has therefore been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 declaration of Helsinki. A copy of the ethical approval is available for review by the Editorial office.

#### **COMPETING INTERESTS**

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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