Does Social Anxiety (Non-clinical View) Negatively Correlate to College Roommate Relationships? A Discussion in Social Psychology Perspective

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Abstract. Roommate conflicts are a popular topic for scholars to study college students’ mental well-being and social interaction, and social anxiety is a major factor which may influence the quality of the well-being and the interaction. However, existing literature does not directly show how the anxiety negatively correlates to roommate relationships. Based on previous framework, the current study uses a famous crime case in China to demonstrate that there is a causality between the type of anxiety and conflicts, and implication of the current research is discussed either.

Introduction

Contemporarily in China, college roommate conflicts become an important issue regarding students’ well-being of college life and psychological and social development, and such issue may develop to serious crimes. Some shocking cases which occurred within the most recent decade, including the well-known cases of MA Jia-jue and LIN Sen-hao, have caught the whole society’s attention to consider mental or psychological factors which can cause roommate conflicts. Traditionally, roommate relationships are a classical topic within social psychological studies, and several scholars have paid attention to causation of college roommate conflicts in social psychological views (non-clinical).

College Roommate Relationships

When students enter colleges, except required academic courses, how to effectively handle social relationships is the other important task for them especially on psychological aspect. Previous literature describe elements of psychological well-being which are brought by the relationships. For example, according to a study (Bowman, 2010), students’ capability to make meaningful friendships with classmates or other students leads to “gains in multiple dimensions of psychological well-being, including environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life and self-acceptance”. Meanwhile, the quality of new college friendships predicts “how well students adjust to interpersonal experiences at college, their feelings of attachment to a university, and their coping with academic demands” (Erath, Flanagan, Bierman, & Tu, 2010). Among those new established relationships, roommate relationships may be one of the complicated elements. One plausible explanation is that the students will live with others during the college period (Mark and Robin, 1997).

According to Erb, Renshaw, Short, and Pollard (2014), for college students, especially freshmen, roommates are typically “the first non-family members and first people of equal status (i.e., in contrast to a parent-child relationship) with whom they live”. The two “firsts” will bring challenges to the students to learn how to get along with one another through daily interaction (Erb, Renshaw, Short, & Pollard, 2014), and the challenges often come from uncontrolled factors, such that students may not choose their roommate(s) before checking. Therefore, personality mismatching may occur (Erb, Renshaw, Short, & Pollard, 2014).
Roommate Conflicts

Roommate conflicts are considered a common experience among college students because roommates have “frequent contact, negotiation of responsibilities, and compromises about the living environment” (e.g., noise level, sleep/waking hours, visitors, and decor) (Erb, Renshaw, Short, & Pollard, 2014). Literature reveals a fact that difficulties with roommate relationships were among the greatest disappointments of the first year and had a negative impact on students’ overall satisfaction (Keup, 2007). In a nationwide survey of 31,500 students, more than half of women and about a half of men believed that they have “frequent” or “occasional” conflicts with roommates or housemates (Liu, Sharkness, & Pryor, 2008). When students described their roommate conflicts, a popular complaint is annoyance at their roommates’ habits, such as “coming home late and waking them” (Mark and Robin, 1997).

Given upon the content of college roommate conflicts, scholars concern what the psychological issue will bring to students. Erb, Renshaw, Short, and Pollard (Mark and Robin, 1997) claimed that roommate relationships can enhance or reduce the quality of mental health and their college adjustment, and positive roommate relationships may help protect them from psychological distress. On the other hand, mostly, for students, difficulties with roommate relationships are a major disappointment during the first year and have a negative impact on students’ overall satisfaction (Beidel & Turner, 2007). Further, roommate relationships serve as “a risk factor for mental health problems and poor adjustment to college” (Mark and Robin, 1997), and frequent conflicts with one’s roommate(s) can be “a significant predictor of overall stress level” (Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley, & Whalen, 2005). Hence, roommate conflicts closely relate to college students’ mental well-being.

The Definition of Social Anxiety

Clinical View

Personality traits are popular directions to study the reasons why people cannot appropriately handle social interaction, and one major topic is social anxiety (SA). Clinically, SA is characterized by two elements: (1) a fear of social situations, and (2) embarrassment or humiliation in social situations (American Psychiatric Association 2000; Parade, Leerkes, & Blankson, 2010). Specifically, SA is characterized by “excessive distress in social situations due to intense fears of negative evaluation” (Beidel & Turner, 2007). Moreover, from clinical research, SA frequently associates with other mental illness or disorders. For example, social anxiety is associated with “difficulties in cognitive, emotional, and experiential dimensions of social adjustment” (Erath, Flanagan, Bierman, & Tu, 2010), and it also links to other abnormal mental symptoms, including substance use, academic impairment, school refusal, and comorbid internalizing symptoms such as depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem (Ginsburg, LaGreca, & Silverman, 1998; Greco & Morris, 2005; Kearney & Silverman, 1990).

Nonclinical View (Daily Social Relationships)

However, SA in the nonclinical side (personal characteristics in social psychological view) seems having much significant influence on social interaction, especially to youths, adolescents and young adults on establishing relationships with others. Non-clinical social SA (NCSA) is characterized by “intense fear of negative evaluation that may lead to the avoidance of fear-eliciting stimuli and events such as performance demands and potentially embarrassing social situations” (Beidel & Morris, 1995; Greco & Morris, 2005), and levels of SA may affect social interaction and relationships differently, such that the levels correlate with negative social performance expectations and negative evaluations about following social performance (Cartwright-Hatton, Hodges, & Porter, 2003; Erath, Flanagan, & Bierman, 2007). Other literature supports the findings and provide more evidence. For instance, according to a study (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997), individuals with higher levels of SA “appear overly critical of their performance in social situations” (as cited in Boucher & Cummings, 2017), and respond more negatively to “perceived social mishaps, including greater feelings of shame and embarrassment, and more concern with the
potential interpersonal costs associated with their mistake(s)” (Moscovitch, Rodebaugh, & Hesch, 2012; as cited in Boucher & Cummings, 2017). Accordingly, SA prospectively “predicts increased loneliness” (Lim, Rodebaugh, Zyphur, & Gleseson, 2016) because those with higher levels of SA are less likely to be nominated as friends by others (Van Zalk & Van Zalk, 2015). On the other hand, SA is not easy to be detected because SA may only have negative interpersonal consequences when people express it externally (Boucher & Cummings, 2017). In other words, individuals should express themselves behaviorally to show that they are in SA conditions (Back et al., 2011). Greco and Morris (2005) further indicated that overt manifestations of social anxiety, such as avoidance and withdrawal, may “hinder the development of age-appropriate social skills due to lack of exposure”.

Moreover, literature reveals that SA will significantly influence young ages’ interaction with peers. SA in adolescence can be highly problematic (Van Zalk & Van Zalk, 2015), as it likely affects current and especially new social interactions through “social fears, excessive discomfort, negative rumination, and somatic symptoms such as trembling, blushing, and sweating before, during, and after social interactions” (Heiser, Turner, Beidel, & Roberson-Nay, 2009; Van Zalk & Van Zalk, 2015). Other scholars have provided more evidence to demonstrate the influence of SA. SA is associated with lower levels of peer acceptance (Greco & Morris, 2005), more uncertainty during interactions among friends (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001). Since college students still belong to the category of adolescents or young adults (18-25, see Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008 for details), it is necessary to have further studies to the SA influence on young ages. Although there is empirical evidence supporting the argument in which SA was related to social preference (like/dislike), social skills, and friendship quality (Greco & Morris, 2005), and scholars (e.g. Boucher & Cummings, 2017; Greco & Morris, 2005) claim that SA does not connect to social impact (visibility/salience) or friendship quantity.

Social Anxiety and College Roommate Conflicts

Social Anxiety and College Students’ Social Relationships

Social anxiety, as a part of personality development issue, according to Parade, Leerkes, and Blankson (2010), is “particularly important during the transition to college as it influences the development of new relationships”. As for students, social anxiety has the following elements: low self-confidence, pudency, difficult relationships with roommate and peers, and feeling uncomfortable in hostel (Vitasaria, Wahabb, Herawanc, Sinnadurai, 2011). SA can also be seen in students with special needs “as they are more likely to face this anxiety due to the low self-confidence they feel about being a rarity” (Cowden, 2010; Vitasaria, Wahabb, Herawanc, Sinnadurai, 2011). Therefore, college students often describe the situations which may cause them to feel shy, and people who frequently feel socially anxious are often quiet, inhibited, and withdrawn (Mark and Robin, 1997; Vitasaria, Wahabb, Herawanc, Sinnadurai, 2011). Thus, shy and introverted students may have higher possibility to be social anxious and are problematic in communication with others.

Correlation between Social Anxiety and College Roommate Conflicts

Unfortunately, from existing literature, there lacks direct theoretical explanation for mechanism of social anxiety in negatively affecting college roommate relationships or causing roommate conflicts. On the other hand, in reality, SA can reduce the quality of overall roommate relationships, as previous studies have demonstrated. Further, if the conflict cannot be managed appropriately, it may bring serious outcome to college students, even crimes. The situation is not unusual in China, and one famous (shocking) case is LIN Sen-hao.

The Case

For a relatively long period, roommate conflicts were treated as a minor problem to college students in China, although some homicide cases, including the case of MA Jia-jue in 2004 were revealed.
However, when LIN Sen-hao was introduced by media, public started to pay more attention to roommate relationships and carefully handle the conflicts. According to the description of one of Lin’s roommates, GE Jun-qi (Wang, 2014), Lin was an introverted person and seemed worried to talk to others. Therefore, he only had a few friends. Comparing with him, the second roommate and the victim, HUANG Yang, was popular among students and had a lot of friends. Meanwhile, Ge also described that Huang sometimes friendly made oral fun of Lin, but he did not express his own feelings about the joke, no matter whether he felt funny or angry. However, on April 1st 2014, Lin decided to fight back (“I wanted to make fun of Huang one time.”) (Wang, 2014) and put toxic substance into the room’s water dispenser. After drinking the water, Huang was dead very soon. However, Lin did not show his confession during trial, even the last minutes before the execution (Wang, 2014).

Some details of the case are still unknown after three years, but public is still able to infer that because of Lin’s shyness in his personality traits, he should have SA more or less, and he could not manage social interaction well, especially about expressing his feeling, roommate conflicts may not be avoided. Specifically, Lin did not demonstrate his dissatisfaction of the jokes to Huang, and others were not able to catch Lin’s mental situation on time neither, the conflict between the two students worsened and further caused the tragedy. Accordingly, the case shows that SA may correlate with college roommate conflicts, although there lacks theoretical explanations for the situation.

**Discussion**

Given upon previous studies and the analysis of Lin’s case, two facts are demonstrated in this study. First of all, SA closely relates to the quality of college students’ social interaction, especially on expressing feelings or emotions to peers or mates. Secondly, due to various lifestyles (e.g. sleeping late) and/or uncontrolled factors (i.e. schools assign roommate(s) to the residents when they check in), conflicts between people in the same room are not avoided. Combining the two facts and the description of the extreme case of Lin, a causation can be found, such that SA. On the other hand, because of the lack of theoretical basis to explain this type of the causality in real world, it needs to develop the systematic theory for it, and the current study provides a research direction for future studies.

**References**


