Sensitivity to Negative Evaluation, Fear of Rejection, and Social Competence Among Students With Avoidant Personality Tendencies

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between sensitivity to negative evaluation, fear of rejection, and social competence among school students with avoidant personality tendencies. Avoidant Personality Disorder is characterized by social inhibition, low self-esteem, and hypersensitivity to criticism, often emerging during adolescence. A correlational, cross-sectional design was employed with a purposive sample of 100 students (50 boys and 50 girls), aged 14–16, from government schools in Faisalabad. Standardized tools, including the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, Fear of Rejection Scale, Social Competence Scale, and Social Avoidance Scale, were used to collect data. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between sensitivity to negative evaluation and fear of rejection, and significant negative correlations between both variables and social competence. Gender-based differences were found: females scored higher on fear of rejection and negative evaluation, while males demonstrated higher social competence. Students from nuclear families and rural areas showed greater avoidant tendencies compared to those from joint families and urban settings. The results highlight the psychological challenges faced by adolescents with avoidant traits, emphasizing the need for early identification and support. Enhancing social skills and emotional resilience through school-based interventions could help mitigate the effects of rejection sensitivity and improve peer interactions. This study adds to the understanding of interpersonal difficulties in adolescence and offers insights for future educational and psychological strategies.

Keywords: Avoidant personality, fear of rejection, negative evaluation, social competence, adolescents.

INTRODUCTION

Fear is a fundamental yet distressing human emotion that plays a critical role in how individuals perceive and react to potential social threats. For some, fear manifests in specific phobias or temporary anxiety; for others, particularly those with Avoidant Personality Disorder (AvPD), it becomes a pervasive and chronic psychological pattern. AvPD is characterized by long-standing feelings of inadequacy, hypersensitivity to negative evaluation, and a pervasive avoidance of social interactions despite a strong desire for acceptance (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2014; Bleuler, 1911). These individuals often refrain from forming interpersonal relationships unless they are certain of uncritical acceptance, reflecting intense fear of rejection and social disapproval (Homey, 2018).

AvPD shares significant symptomatic overlap with Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), particularly in domains of fear of rejection, negative evaluation, and social inhibition (Tamura, Iitaka, & Kido, 1969; Marks, 1970). While AvPD is classified as a personality disorder on Axis II and SAD as a clinical syndrome on Axis I (APA, 2014), research increasingly supports the view that these two conditions may exist on a severity continuum (Barlow, 1992). Both are associated with significant impairments in social and academic functioning, especially during adolescence—a developmental period when peer relationships and social acceptance become critically important (Ginsburg, La Greca, & Silverman, 1998).

Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) is a core cognitive component of social anxiety and AvPD. It involves apprehension regarding others' judgments, distress over potential disapproval, and expectations of being negatively judged (Leary, 1983). Studies show that socially anxious individuals may possess adequate social skills but fail to perform well in social settings due to overwhelming self-doubt and anticipatory anxiety (Clark & Arkowitz, 1975; Crozier, 1981). This negative self-evaluation often stems not from actual skill deficits, but from distorted beliefs about one's social competence (Jackson, Flaherty, & Kosuth, 2000).

Closely tied to FNE is rejection sensitivity (RS), which refers to the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to social rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). RS has been linked to disrupted peer relationships, emotional dysregulation, and academic underachievement (Berenson et al., 2009; Grills & Ollendick, 2002). Adolescents high in RS are more likely to misinterpret ambiguous social cues as signs of rejection, leading to withdrawal and reduced social participation (Inderbitzen, 1997). This pattern can perpetuate feelings of loneliness and inadequacy, further deepening AvPD traits.

Another key construct in this context is social competence (SC)—the ability to interact effectively with others in various social situations. Social competence includes social skills, emotional regulation, communication abilities, and adaptive interpersonal behaviors (Krasnor, 1997; Rubin & Krasnor, 1992). It plays a central role in peer acceptance, self-esteem, and academic success (Strahan, 2003; Wood, 2006). However, individuals with AvPD and high RS often report deficits in social competence, not necessarily due to a lack of ability but due to avoidance of social situations that would foster such skills (Henderson & Zimbardo, 2010).

Empirical studies have also highlighted gender and contextual variations. For instance, girls tend to experience higher social anxiety, while boys show more sensitivity to rejection (Grills & Ollendick, 2002). Students from nuclear families or rural settings have been found to exhibit higher levels of social avoidance and rejection fear, while those from joint families or urban areas often report greater social competence and lower social anxiety (Ginsburg et al., 1998; Myers, Aarons, Tomlinson, & Stein, 2003). These sociocultural factors influence how adolescents cope with interpersonal fears and either buffer or intensify the expression of AvPD traits.

Despite the growing body of research on AvPD, FNE, RS, and SC, few studies have examined their interconnected relationships in school-age populations, particularly within South Asian or collectivist

contexts where family structure and societal expectations heavily shape social development. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to explore the relationship between sensitivity to negative evaluation, fear of rejection, and social competence among school students exhibiting avoidant personality tendencies. Identifying these links can help in developing early psychological interventions, enhance academic performance, and improve adolescent well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design and Settings

This research employed a correlational and cross-sectional study design to investigate the relationship between sensitivity to negative evaluation, fear of rejection, and social competence among school students exhibiting avoidant personality tendencies. The study was conducted across selected Government High Schools in Faisalabad, including Govt. New Model High School G.M Abad, Islamia High School, M.C High School, New Colony High School, Kotwali High School, Crescent High School, and Pakistan Model High School.

Questionnaire and Procedure

Four standardized instruments were used in this study:

1. **Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (Leary, 1983)** – A 12-item scale measuring apprehension about others' evaluations.

2. **Fear of Rejection Scale (Downey & Feldman, 2013)** – An 18-item measure assessing sensitivity to rejection.

3. **Social Competence Scale (Sharma, Shukla, & Shukla, 1988)** – A 50-item tool evaluating social effectiveness.

4. **Social Avoidance Scale (Watson & Friend, 1969)** – A 28-item dichotomous scale used for screening avoidant personality tendencies.

Initially, the Social Avoidance Scale was administered to identify students with avoidant personality traits. After obtaining necessary permissions, informed consent was secured from both participants and their teachers. Students were given the demographic information form and then briefed on the study's purpose. The questionnaires were administered in group settings within classrooms. The researcher addressed any questions regarding difficult English terms during data collection.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 24. Descriptive statistics were calculated first. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine the relationships between variables, and independent sample t-tests were performed to assess gender and demographic differences.

Results

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between sensitivity to negative evaluation, fear of rejection, and social competence among school students exhibiting avoidant personality tendencies. A total of 100 participants were selected, equally divided by gender (50 male and 50 female). Demographic profiling revealed that 75% of the students came from nuclear families and 75% resided in rural areas. Moreover, 80% of the students reported having fewer than five friends, indicating limited social interaction, which may be indicative of socially avoidant behavior.

Correlation analysis using Pearson Product Moment Coefficient showed significant associations among the study variables. A strong positive correlation was observed between sensitivity to negative evaluation and fear of rejection ($r = .955$, $p < .001$), suggesting that students who are highly sensitive to being judged

negatively are also more likely to fear rejection. Conversely, negative correlations were found between both sensitivity to negative evaluation and social competence ($r = -.954$, $p < .001$), and fear of rejection and social competence ($r = -.945$, $p < .001$). These results imply that higher levels of social anxiety and rejection sensitivity are associated with lower levels of social competence, reflecting poorer interpersonal functioning.

To assess gender differences, independent sample t-tests were conducted. Results showed that female students scored significantly higher in both fear of negative evaluation (M = 26, SD = 1.8) and fear of rejection (M = 110, SD = 8.9) compared to male students (M = 48, SD = 2.2; M = 162, SD = 5.5, respectively). In contrast, male students demonstrated higher social competence (M = 130, SD = 3) than females (M = 182, SD = 8.6). All comparisons were statistically significant at $p < .001$. These findings suggest that female students may be more prone to internalizing negative social experiences, while males may exhibit greater functional social abilities.

Further analysis compared students based on family structure. Those from nuclear families exhibited higher levels of sensitivity to negative evaluation (M = 48, SD = 2.2) and fear of rejection (M = 164, SD = 6.4) compared to their counterparts from joint families (M = 34, SD = 10.8; M = 127, SD = 25). On the other hand, students from joint families displayed better social competence (M = 165, SD = 25) than those from nuclear families (M = 130, SD = 3). All differences were significant at $p < .001$. This may be attributed to the enriched interpersonal environment in joint family systems that fosters better socialization.

Lastly, a comparison of urban and rural backgrounds revealed that rural students scored higher on negative evaluation (M = 41, SD = 10) and fear of rejection (M = 145, SD = 25) than their urban peers (M = 26, SD = 1.8; M = 110, SD = 9, respectively). In contrast, urban students had greater social competence (M = 182, SD = 8.7) than rural students (M = 147, SD = 24), with all results being statistically significant ($p < .001$). These findings may reflect the influence of greater social exposure and opportunities for interpersonal engagement in urban settings.

In summary, the results confirmed significant associations between fear-based traits and social functioning, with demographic variables such as gender, family structure, and residential background playing influential roles in shaping these psychological outcomes among adolescents with avoidant personality tendencies.

Results (Narrative with Tables and Interpretation)

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants (N = 100)

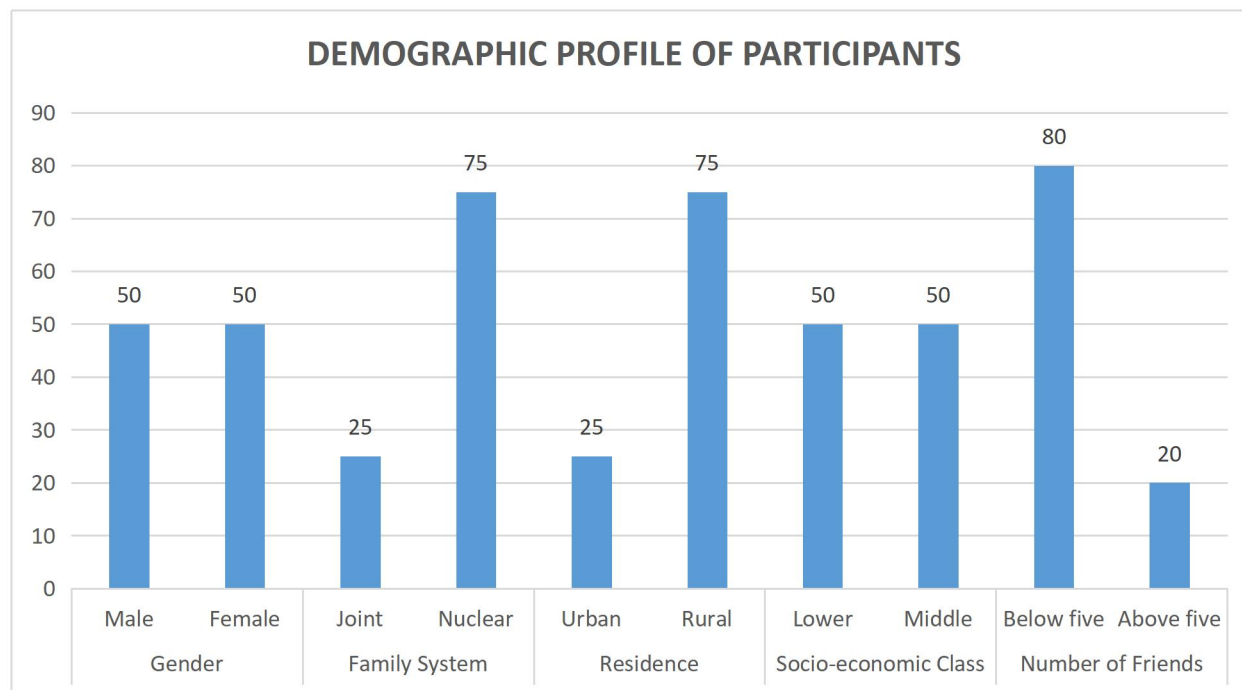| Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	50	50%
	Female	50	50%
Family System	Joint	25	25%
	Nuclear	75	75%
Residence	Urban	25	25%
	Rural	75	75%
Socio-economic Class	Lower	50	50%
	Middle	50	50%
Number of Friends	Below five	80	80%

Above five	20	20%

Interpretation

The sample was evenly divided by gender. Most students came from nuclear families and rural areas, suggesting a potentially socially limited environment. A large majority had fewer than five friends, which may reflect underlying social avoidance tendencies.

Figure 01: Demographic Profile of Participants (N = 100)

Correlation Analysis Between Variables

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix among Key Variables (N = 100)

Variables	1 (NE)	2 (FR)	3 (SC)
1. Negative Evaluation (NE)	—	.955**	-.954**
2. Fear of Rejection (FR)		—	-.945**
3. Social Competence (SC)			—

Note: *p < .001, ** highly significant

Interpretation

There is a strong positive correlation between negative evaluation and fear of rejection (r = .955), suggesting that students who fear being negatively judged also fear rejection. Both variables show a strong negative correlation with social competence, indicating that higher anxiety and fear lower students' ability to interact socially.

Gender Differences

Table 3: Independent Sample t-Test Between Males and Females

Variable	Male (n=50)	Female (n=50)	t-value	p-value	Mean Difference
Negative Evaluation	48 ± 2.2	26 ± 1.8	5.4	.000	22
Fear of Rejection	162 ± 5.5	110 ± 8.9	3.5	.000	52
Social Competence	130 ± 3	182 ± 8.6	-3.9	.000	-52

Interpretation
Female students showed significantly higher fear of negative evaluation and rejection, while male students demonstrated greater social competence. This may be due to socialization differences or emotional expressivity.

Family System Comparison

Table 4: t-Test Between Nuclear and Joint Families

Variable	Nuclear (n=75)	Joint (n=25)	t-value	p-value	Mean Difference
Negative Evaluation	48 ± 2.2	34 ± 10.8	6.7	.000	14
Fear of Rejection	164 ± 6.4	127 ± 25	7.1	.000	37
Social Competence	130 ± 3	165 ± 25	-6.6	.000	-35

Interpretation
Students from nuclear families had significantly higher fear scores and lower social competence than those from joint families, possibly due to limited familial social exposure and support.

Rural vs. Urban Differences

Table 5: t-Test Between Rural and Urban Residents

Variable	Urban (n=25)	Rural (n=75)	t-value	p-value	Mean Difference
Negative Evaluation	26 ± 1.8	41 ± 10	-6.8	.000	-15
Fear of Rejection	110 ± 9	145 ± 25	-6.5	.000	-35
Social Competence	182 ± 8.7	147 ± 24	6.9	.000	35

Interpretation
Urban students demonstrated higher social competence and lower fear-related traits. The rural environment may contribute to more socially avoidant behavior due to fewer interaction opportunities or stricter social norms.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored the relationship between sensitivity to negative evaluation, fear of rejection, and social competence in school students exhibiting avoidant personality tendencies. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between sensitivity to negative evaluation and fear of rejection, while both of these variables had a negative correlation with social competence. This supports the theoretical premise that heightened self-consciousness and negative social anticipation lead to greater emotional avoidance and lower interpersonal efficacy (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Davis, 1983). Students who reported higher sensitivity to social disapproval or rejection were more likely to exhibit withdrawal behaviors and reduced social confidence, mirroring earlier findings on social anxiety disorder and its close relationship with avoidant traits (Buckner & Heimberg, 2010). The gender-based findings indicated that females were more prone to fear of rejection and negative evaluation, while males demonstrated higher social competence, consistent with Grills and Ollendick's (2002) observation that males typically underreport social anxiety despite similar impairments. Moreover, urban students showed higher social competence than rural students, possibly due to more exposure to diverse social settings, supporting the idea that social exposure is a buffer against rejection sensitivity (Ayduk et al., 2008). The study further found that students from nuclear families had higher levels of rejection sensitivity and negative evaluation, suggesting that joint families may offer stronger social support systems that help mitigate these tendencies (Downey, Lebolt, Rincón, & Freitas, 1998).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase Sample Diversity

Future research should include **larger and more diverse samples** across cities and school types to enhance generalizability (Beauchemin, Hutchins, & Patterson, 2008).

Cultural Adaptation of Scales

Utilize **Urdu-translated versions** of standardized tools to improve comprehension and response validity (Semrud-Clikeman & Kutz, 2007).

Longitudinal and Qualitative Approaches

Conduct **longitudinal and mixed-methods studies** to explore causal pathways and richer insights into avoidant personality development (Wood, 2006; Mischel & Shoda, 1995).

Psychoeducational Interventions

Introduce **school-based interventions** such as mindfulness training, social skills workshops, and expressive writing activities shown to reduce social anxiety and rejection sensitivity (Wilson, 2006; Henderson & Zimbardo, 2010).

Family-Based Therapy Models

Develop **family-inclusive counseling modules**, especially in nuclear families, to build support mechanisms for adolescents at risk of social withdrawal (Ginsburg, La Greca, & Silverman, 1998).

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