

The Level of Generalized Anxiety Disorder Among Doctoral Students In UiTM Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract: Generalized Anxiety Disorder is a type of mental illness or neurosis. This disease usually happens among those who have experienced life anxiety such as problems in academic, finance, family, society and others. This article discusses the factors and level of Generalized Anxiety Disorder experienced by the lecturers in UiTM Pulau Pinang who are currently pursuing their Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program in various fields at different public universities. There were 23 respondents in this study and this study used descriptive quantitative statistics. This study used two parts of questionnaires which there was a set of questions on respondents' demographic profiles and three sets of questions (HAMA, BAI and PSWQ) based on Generalized Anxiety Disorder's symptoms. The findings showed that the main factor why the majority of the PhD students in this study experienced Generalized Anxiety Disorder was because of the type of courses they had enrolled in. HAMA and BAI explained that majority of the PhD students had less cognitive symptoms, somatic and self problems throughout their studies. However, PSWQ explained that although all respondents experienced Generalized Anxiety Disorder, the level was moderate as only a small number of the respondents faced severe/chronic symptoms. Students who experienced high level of Generalized Anxiety Disorder are advised to seek proper treatment to enable them to complete their studies effectively.

Key words: Generalized anxiety disorder • Students • Doctor of Philosophy Program • UiTM Penang

INTRODUCTION

Generalized Anxiety Disorder is a type of anxiety disorder. Generalized Anxiety Disorder is also known as neurosis in mental disorder [1]. This disorder is described as a type of anxiety among individuals who worry about unreliable matters [2]. Generalized Anxiety Disorder is referred to as a chronic disorder involving excessive anxiety and worry towards any activities for a minimum period of one month and a maximum of six months [3]. The ratio of man and woman who are suffering from Generalized Anxiety Disorder is 2:1. This might occur due to differences in hormone, culture pressure and high anxiety rate [4].

This disorder also refers to the emotion of fear, worry, or distress which was manifested by the infected

individual. Anxiety is a common feeling of human population but if it happens excessively within six months (maximum) in all aspects of life, this particular individual is regarded as a victim of Generalized Anxiety Disorder [5]. Anxiety is a psychological problem faced by students, especially university students. According to a study conducted by a group of researchers from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, USA, they found that the students in universities and colleges are currently living in anxiety and tension and the number has been increasing since the 1930s [6].

Various factors which have caused them to suffer from anxiety have been identified. About 60% of university students failed to complete their studies at the undergraduate level due to their incapability in managing psychological problem such as anxiety [7]. There are also

studies which demonstrated that anxiety has many negative effects on students in schools, colleges and universities, such as difficult to focus in classes, lack of motivation and interest, absence from lectures, headache and fatigue [8]. In fact, chronic anxiety can lead to a serious mental illness if not monitored at an early stage [9].

Studies showed that there are similar findings reported on the persistence faced by university students whether they are in undergraduate or postgraduate courses. Graduates and undergraduate students are different because PhD courses involved integration and academic strength. PhD students will have to go through three different levels of courses, nominations and dissertations and each phase has different challenges. Thus, students who are able to handle all these challenges can quickly complete their studies on time. However, there are times when some students are likely to take longer time to complete their programmes of study [10]. As a result, some students suffer from stress, depression or severe anxiety disorders.

In Malaysian context, university students in Malaysia often feel anxious if they are not able to meet the expectation of their parents and the university. In addition, pressure also happens due to external factors such as one's habit or lifestyle which includes medication, smoking and lack of exercise and sleep [11]. Besides, tension can also occur when there are problems associated with parents' divorce, financial problems, loss or death of loved ones and health matters. University students in this country is said to be the elites who are never satisfied with what they have achieved [12]. They are burdened with dilemmas of a lot of problems mentioned above. As a result, they face a lot of conflicts which lead to depression.

Up to now, no specific study has been done on Generalized Anxiety Disorder experienced by students studying at the PhD level. Therefore, this study aims to identify the factors and the level of Generalized Anxiety Disorder experienced by students who are pursuing their doctoral programs.

Research Instrument: It is quite difficult to determine Generalized Anxiety Disorder on a particular individual without systematic measurement. Clinically, it is difficult to diagnose whether a person is suffering from Generalized Anxiety Disorder or not by using only one measuring tool [13]. Thus, the researchers took the initiative to adopt three measuring tools to determine the level of General Anxiety Disorder of a patient based on the symptoms experienced by the students.

The inventories or instruments used were Hamilton Anxiety (HAMA), Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) and Penn State Worry Questionnaire (PSWQ). HAMA consisted of 7 symptoms on somatic and 7 symptoms on soul. Scale used is from 1 (mild) to 4 (very severe). For HAMA, the score is less than 17 (mild), 18-24 (mild-moderate), 25-30 (moderate-severe) and score above 30 is severe [14]. Studies showed that HAMA was reliable to be used for adolescents and adults. This was proven when HAMA was used by different interviewers for anxiety disorder patients in less than ten days [15].

BAI on the other hand, consisted of 21 items comprising 13 psychological symptoms, 5 cognitive symptoms and 3 somatic. The scale used is from 1 (mild) - 4 (very severe). The score for BAI is 0-21 (mild), 22-35 (medium) and more than 35 is very severe. Meanwhile, BAI has a high consistency for the validity and reliability with psychiatric patients. A study found that it also has a high reliability ($r = 0.67$) and consistency in which Cronbach $\alpha = 0.92$ and $\alpha = 0.94$ [16].

In addition, PSWQ consisted of 16 items on pathological anxiety. The scale used is from 1 (none) - 5 (very common), while the score is 16-39 (low anxiety), 40-59 (moderate anxiety) and 60-80 (high concern). It was found that it has a high reliability ($r = 0.65$) and consistency in which $\alpha = 0.77$. PSWQ was also proven to have a reliable consistency with adolescents and adults. In fact, its test and re-test reliability is more than eight to ten weeks [17].

Methodology: This study used a questionnaire in identifying the level of Generalized Anxiety Disorder experienced by the PhD students during their study period. The questionnaire was divided into two major parts. Part A consists of respondents' demographic information which includes their background such as gender, age, field of study, academic status and the factors of anxiety. Part B consists of three sets of questions based on Generalized Anxiety Disorder's symptoms (HAMA, BAI and PSWQ). The questions asked in this section comprised of 91 symptoms.

Respondents were required to answer all the questions as the researchers needed to identify the level of anxiety disorder that the students faced and the factors which caused them to suffer severe anxiety disorder. Questionnaires were distributed to 31 respondents and the researchers explained the steps on how to answer the questions. The time allocated was between 15-30 minutes. After all the respondents had completed the questionnaires, the researchers collected the questionnaires.

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Profile

Respondent's Profile		Frequency =23	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	8	34.8
	Female	15	65.2
Age	25-30	2	8.7
	31-35	11	47.8
	36-40	9	39.1
	40 and above	1	4.3
Mode	Full-time study	15	65.2
	Part-time study	8	34.8
Field	Science and Technology	18	78.3
	Social Sciences	5	21.7
Have experienced	Yes	21	91.3
Anxiety	No	2	8.7

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics and percentage to identify the connection between the demographic background of the samples (gender, age, field of study and factors of anxiety) and the level of anxiety disorders. Every part of the questionnaire was compiled and arranged according to the main objectives of this study which are to identify the factors and the level of anxiety disorders among the lecturers of UiTM Pulau Pinang who were pursuing their PhD programs.

Result Analysis: The total number UiTM Pulau Pinang lecturers who were doing their PhD during the time of the study was 63. Questionnaires were distributed to 31 samples, equal to 50% of the total. However, out of the total, only 23 forms were returned: 15 female respondents (65.2%) and 8 male respondents (34.8%).

Table 1 showed the profile of the respondents; gender, age, education, field of study and information on whether they have experienced anxiety before. Majority of the respondents who participated in this research were those between the age of 31- 35 (47.8%). Out of the total respondents, 15 (65.2%) were full time students of PhD while the remaining 8 students (34.8%) were doing their PhD on a part time basis. In term of fields, 18 (78.3%) of the respondents were pursuing their studies in Science and Technology while 5 (21.7%) were in the Social Sciences. 21 of the respondents (91.3%) admitted that they had and were experiencing anxiety during their PhD studies and only 2 (8.7%) were less likely to suffer from anxiety.

There were various factors being presented in the questionnaires and among them were type of courses, supervisor, university management and finance.

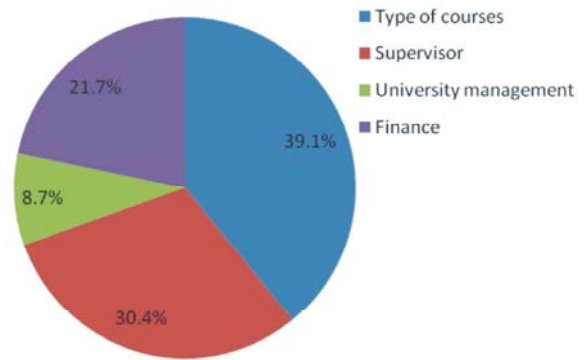


Fig. 1: Factors of Generalized Anxiety Disorder

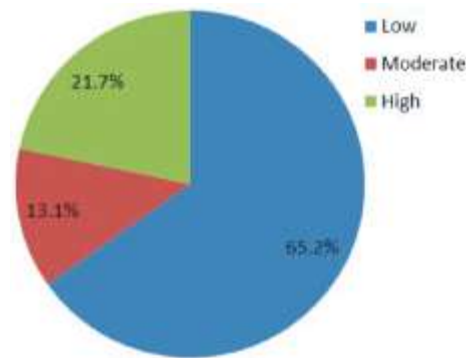


Fig. 2: Level of Anxiety Disorder Analysed Using HAMA

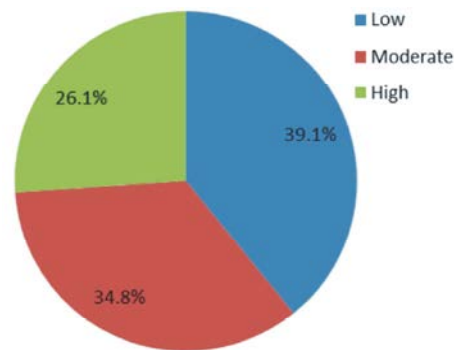


Fig. 3: Level of Anxiety Disorder Analysed Using BAI

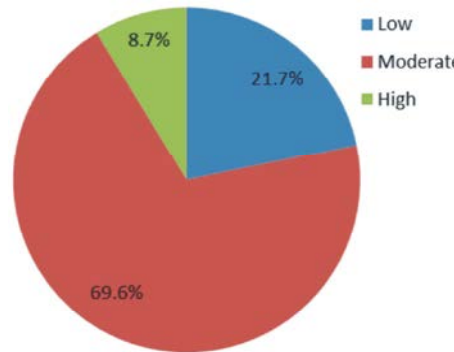


Fig. 4: Level of Anxiety Disorder Analysed Using PSWQ

However, the findings from this study indicated that the main factor which caused many respondents (39.1%) to experience anxiety was the type of courses that they had enrolled in. The second factor which caused anxiety was the supervisor at (30.4%) and the third factor was financial problem at 21.7% (5 respondents). See Figure 1.

In order to answer the objectives of this study which is to identify the level of anxiety disorder suffered by all respondents, the findings were presented according to the instruments used. HAMA revealed that 15 respondents (65.2%) had experienced anxiety disorders at a low level because the scores obtained by them was less than 17, while there were 5 respondents (21.7%) who experienced a high level of anxiety disorder as their scores were above 25, as shown in Figure 2.

BAI demonstrated that the highest percentage of the level of anxiety was 39.1%. This is because majority the respondents were at low to moderate levels with the scores between 10 to 18. On the other hand, only 6 respondents (26.1%) suffered from anxiety disorder at a serious level. Their scores were between 30 to 63, as shown in Figure 3.

PSWQ illustrated that there were 16 respondents (69.6%) who experienced a moderate level of anxiety disorders with the scores between 40 to 59. It also indicated that only 2 respondents (8.7%) experienced a high anxiety disorder. See Figure 1.

DISCUSSION

The questionnaires were randomly distributed to 31 respondents but only 23 respondents: 15 females and 8 males, returned them. The findings are consistent with several previous studies [18]. In term of age, majority of the respondents were between 31-35 years old. The results also indicated that the number of female students experienced Generalized Anxiety Disorder was higher than the male students.

The main factor of why many respondents (39.1%) experienced anxiety was because of the difficulties in handling the courses that they had enrolled in during the period of study. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Tinto [19] in the literature review mentioned earlier. According to him, PhD students often face serious challenges on the course and the nomination of their dissertation. This suggests that academic study is the dominant factor for a PhD student.

The findings of HAMA and BAI explained that the majority of respondents did not have a lot of problems in

terms of somatic / physical or self when pursuing their PhD. However, there were a few respondents who suffered cognitive, physical and psychological damage. The findings are consistent with several previous studies which explained that the negative effects may occur in some patients who suffer from Generalized Anxiety Disorder [20]. PSWQ showed that the level of anxiety was at a moderate level for the majority of the respondents. This explained that PhD students were in stress during their studies. This implies that they often felt depressed and nervous. This situation is quite common since the most significant effect of General Anxiety Disorder sufferers is depression [21].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study reveals the main factor that caused anxiety as well as the level of anxiety disorders among the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) students who are also the lecturers of UiTM Pulau Pinang. Although the number of the samples was only 23, this random sampling could be used to represent the students of doctoral programs in higher education institutions. However, the results of this study should not be generalised due its small sample size.

In this study the level of Generalized Anxiety Disorder of a student was determined based on the symptoms found in the report of the three self-report inventories, namely HAMA, BAI and PSWQ. The results from these three self-report inventories indicate that pursuing a PhD is not easy. It requires someone to have somatic/physical, cognitive, spiritual and emotional strength to face many challenges including troubles in research areas, supervisors, university management and finance. If these challenges are not dealt systematically and efficiently, it is not impossible for a student to develop Generalized Anxiety Disorder as experienced by some of the respondents in this study. Therefore, when a person has some anxiety disorder symptoms, he or she should make an effort to overcome the problem by seeking for a proper treatment.

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