The Impact of Social Exclusion on Social Anxiety: The Chain Mediating Role of Self-focused Attention and Self Esteem

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Abstract: <u>*Objective*</u>*: To explore and study the mediating role of self-concern and self-esteem in social exclusion and social anxiety among college students.* <u>*Methods*</u>*: A survey of 400 college students was conducted using the Social Exclusion Questionnaire for Undergraduate, the Self-Focused Attention Scale, the Self-Esteem Scale, and the Interaction Anxiousness Scale.* <u>*Results*</u>*: 1) Social exclusion was significantly positively correlated with self-focused attention and social anxiety, and negatively correlated with self-esteem; self-focused attention was significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem, and positively correlated with social anxiety; self-esteem was significantly negatively correlated with social anxiety. 2) Social exclusion can have a direct effect on social anxiety, or it can act on social anxiety through three mediating pathways: the mediating role of self-focused attention, the mediating role of self-esteem, and the chain mediating role of self-focused attention and self-esteem.* <u>*Conclusion*</u>*: College students' social exclusion not only directly predicts social anxiety, but also indirectly predicts social anxiety through the mediating roles of self-focused attention and self-esteem, as well as the chain mediating role of self-focused attention and self-esteem.*

Keywords: Social exclusion, Self-focused attention, Self-esteem, Social anxiety.

1. Introduction

Social anxiety refers to the emotional reaction and avoidance behavior of strong apprehension, nervousness, or fear of one or more interpersonal situations [1], which is mainly manifested as a strong sense of fear and intimidation of other people's appraisal in social situations [2]. In recent years, the incidence of social anxiety tends to be younger and increasing year by year [3]. Research shows that from childhood to adolescence, individual social anxiety shows a significant growth trend [4], and reaches a peak between the ages of 13 and 23 years [5], and the age of college students in China happens to be in the high prevalence of social anxiety. Data show that 61.8% of college students have different degrees of anxiety, of which social anxiety accounts for 72.5% of anxious college students [6]. Social anxiety can adversely affect the physical and mental health of college students, job interviews, and interpersonal interactions [7]. If social anxiety is not corrected and guided, it will not only affect students' motivation and academic performance, but also affect the integrity of their personality and hinder their socialization [8]. In recent years, the phenomenon of social anxiety is widespread and harmful. Therefore, this study aims to explore and study the influence mechanism of social anxiety in college students in order to better reduce social anxiety.

Social exclusion is an emotion in which an individual feels ignored, rejected, or isolated by other individuals or social groups [9]. Social exclusion, as an unpleasant experience, can have a significant impact on an individual's cognitive, physiological, and psychological functioning [10]; Slavich et al.'s psychobiological model found that stressors associated with social exclusion stimulate areas of the brain that control negative emotions [11]; Baumesiter et al.'s findings found a strong link between social exclusion and an individual's negative emotions [12]; Leary et al. further found that social exclusion causes individuals to experience negative emotions such as loneliness, anxiety, and depression [13]. Wu Huijun et

al. concluded that college students are a high-risk group for social exclusion, so it is necessary to pay attention to the adverse effects of campus social exclusion on college students. College students' social exclusion mainly refers to the marginalization phenomenon in which individual students are unable to establish or maintain normal interpersonal relationships in campus life or in the groups they belong to, and in which the individual is not identified with the student group, as well as unable to obtain equal rights [14]. Individuals' perceived exclusion from important social groups is the main cause of anxiety [15]. Thus, based on the literature review, Hypothesis H1 of this study is proposed: social exclusion is a significant positive predictor of social anxiety.

Self-focused attention refers to the fact that individuals focus more attention resources on internal information, such as attention to their own emotions, clothing, appearance, thinking and other information [16]. Social exclusion plays an important role in social anxiety, but how to play a role needs to be further explored. There may be other mediating variables in its influencing mechanism. Gao Peixia 's research also shows that when individuals have a high degree of self-focus, they are more likely to experience negative emotional experiences such as anxiety, grief, sadness, and even produce various clinical symptoms such as anorexia nervosa and depression [17]. Information processing theory holds that when self-processing information, if the individual ignores the external stimuli and pays too much attention to the self, the resulting non-adaptive cognition will make the individual in an anxious emotional state. Individuals with high levels of self-focused attention are more likely to have social anxiety due to their high attention to negative factors in social situations. In the related research on social exclusion and self-attention, existing studies have shown that individuals will pursue the improvement of personal efficacy after encountering social exclusion. They need to affirm their self-ability and value, and supplement their sense of control, power and ability. It will help to weaken the impact of social

exclusion, and its follow-up behavior will pay more attention to itself [18]. Therefore, this study proposes the hypothesis H2: self-focused attention plays a mediating role between social exclusion and social anxiety.

Self-esteem is an emotional experience in which a person respects himself or herself and has a recognized or favorable attitude towards himself or herself, it is a positive psychological quality [19] and is the individual's overall evaluation of himself or herself [20]. It has been shown that people with low self-esteem evaluate themselves negatively, and such negative beliefs are stored in memory and are automatically activated in social situations, leading to a misinterpretation of the situation and spawning strong social anxiety [21]. Empirical studies have also found that individuals with low self-esteem are more sensitive to the rejection of others because they are overly concerned about negative evaluations from others, which leads to an increase in anxiety levels in social situations [22], while individuals with higher self-esteem have a clearer self-concept, and are less likely to experience anxiety because they are able to form correct attributions and explanations for negative evaluations from others in social activities [2].Williams' study showed that self-esteem showed a significant negative correlation with social exclusion [9]; according to the sociometric theory, social exclusion leads to a decrease in an individual's self-esteem due to exclusion from a group for personal reasons, where the individual's sense of belonging is not satisfied [23]. Social exclusion affects individual cognition, which is the basis for the formation of individual self-esteem. As a result, the hypothesis H3 of this study is proposed: self-esteem plays a mediating role between social exclusion and social anxiety.

Self-focused attention and self-esteem can play a mediating role between social exclusion and social anxiety, so what is the relationship between the two? Domestic research on self-focused attention and self-esteem is mostly from the perspective of self-consciousness of self-attention. Wang Fangmei's research on the development characteristics and correlation of migrant children's self-esteem and self-consciousness found that self-consciousness can significantly predict the development level of migrant children 's self-esteem [24]. In the study of the relationship between self-consciousness and self-esteem of students with learning difficulties in junior high school, Zhao Jing found that the self-consciousness of students with learning difficulties had a significant negative predictive effect on self-esteem [25]. Among college students, studies have shown that college students' self-consciousness significantly negatively predicts self-esteem [26]. Based on the above three hypotheses, this study believes that individuals will pursue the improvement of personal efficacy more after encountering social exclusion, that is, higher self-focused attention, which will lead to individuals paying too much attention to their negative information, so that the level of individual self-esteem will decline. When encountering various social life and interpersonal events, the self-evaluation is too low, and it is more likely to produce social anxiety. Therefore, this study proposes Hypothesis H4: self-focused attention and self-esteem play a chain mediating role between social exclusion and social anxiety.

2. Research Objects and Methods

2.1 Research Objects

There were 412 college students in China, 12 invalid questionnaires were deleted, and 400 valid questionnaires were collected (97.09%). There are 169 male students, 231 female students, 245 born in rural areas, 155 born in urban areas, 201 only children and 199 non-only children.

2.2 Methods

1.2.1 Social Exclusion

Questionaire for Undergraduates. In 2013, Wu Huijun et al. developed and completed the questionnaire [14], which contains a total of 19 items, using a 5-point scoring standard, from 1 point (never) to 5 points (always). Wu Huijun et al. obtained two dimensions of social exclusion of college students through factor analysis, i.e., direct exclusion as well as indirect exclusion, and the scores of the questionnaire's scores represent the level of social exclusion of college students. The Cronbach 's α coefficient of the questionnaire in this study was 0.94.

2.2.2 Self-Focused Attention Scale (SFAS)

In this study, the Chinese version translated and revised by Xiao Shilai [27] was used, including 17 items. The SFAS mainly uses a 5-point scoring method, with 1 meaning "completely inconsistent" and 5 meaning "completely consistent", and the higher the score, the more consistent it is with the options. Therefore, the Cronbach's α coefficient of the questionnaire in this study is 0.89.

2.2.3 Self-Esteem Scale (SES)

In this study, we used the Chinese version translated and revised by Ji Yifu et al. [28], which contains a total of 10 items with a total score of 10 to 40, with the size of the total score representing the level of self-esteem. The scale is widely used to measure the self-esteem level of college students in China, and the Cronbach 's α coefficient of the scale in this study was 0.85.

2.2.4 Interaction Anxiousness Scale (IAS)

This study used the revised version of Peng Chunzi et al [29], which contains a total of 15 items and uses a 5-point scoring method, in order to improve the reliability of the scale, the 3rd, 6th, 10th, and 15th questions are reverse scored, and the higher the score, the higher the level of social anxiety. The Cronbach 's α coefficient for this scale in this study was 0.87.

2.3 Statistical Processing

The descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of the data in this study were analyzed using spss25 software, and the mediation effect model was validated using the spss macro program PROCESS. The common method bias test was conducted in this study using the Harman one-way test, and it

was found that 11 common factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted from the 61 items, and the first common factor explained 22.31% of the total variation, which was less than the 40% critical value. Therefore, there is no serious common method bias problem in this study.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Each Variable

The results of descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of the four variables of social exclusion, Self-focused attention, self-esteem and social anxiety are shown in Table 1. Social exclusion is significantly positively correlated with self-focused attention and social anxiety, and significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem; Self-focused attention is significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem, and significantly positively correlated with social anxiety; self-esteem is significantly negatively correlated with social anxiety.

3.2 Chain Mediation Effect Analysis of Self-esteem and Self-focused Attention

The non-parametric percentile Bootstrap method of Hayes' mediation effect test was adopted, specifically using Model 6 of the SPSS macro program, to test the mediation effect of self-focused attention and self-esteem between social exclusion and social anxiety under the condition of 1000 samples and controlling for gender, place of birth, and only child status. Regression analyses showed that social exclusion significantly positively predicted self-focused attention (β=0.38, P<0.01) and significantly negatively predicted self-esteem (β=-0.27, P<0.01), self-focused attention significantly negatively predicted self-esteem (β=-0.26, P<0.01). After all variables were entered into the regression model, social exclusion was a significant direct predictor of social anxiety (β=0.26, P<0.01), while both self-focused attention (β=0.13, P<0.01) and self-esteem (β=-0.18, P<0.01) significantly predicted social anxiety, as shown in Table 2.

The mediating effect indicated (as shown in Table 3 and Figure 1) that self-focused attention and self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between social exclusion and social anxiety, with a mediating effect value of 0.12, which accounted for 30.95% of the total effect value (0.37). The mediating effect of 3 paths was generated through the analysis of specific research data: 1) an indirect path through social exclusion → self-focused attention → social anxiety; 2) an indirect path through social exclusion → self-esteem → social anxiety; and 3) an indirect path through social exclusion → self-focused attention → self-esteem → social anxiety. According to the data in Table 3, the 95% confidence intervals of the three indirect paths do not include 0, thus proving that all three paths have significant indirect effects.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of each variable (r)

variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1.Social exclusion	2.53	0.76	1			
2. Self-focused attention	2.76	0.72	0.40**	1		
3. Self-esteem	2.95	0.81	-0.34**	-0.35**		
4. Social anxiety	2.85	0.77	0.34**	0.28**	-0.31**	1

Note: * *. At the 0.01 level (two-tailed), the correlation is significant.

Table 2: Regression analysis of variable relationship in chain mediation model

Item	Social Anxiety		Self-focused attention		Self-esteem		Social anxiety	
	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t
Gender	0.04	0.54	-0.05	-0.70	-0.09	-1.16	0.03	0.45
Grade	0.02	0.88	-0.01	-0.37	0.02	1.01	0.02	1.15
Only child situation	0.21	2.87**	0.07	1.11	-0.09	-1.23	0.18	2.53**
Origin	-0.09	-1.15	-0.04	-0.61	0.13	1.77	-0.06	-0.76
Family Structure	-0.04	-0.36	0.27	2.78**	-0.13	-1.18	-0.11	-1.03
Social exclusion	0.37	7.66**	0.38	8.61**	-0.27	-5.07**	0.26	4.82**
Self-focused attention					-0.26	-4.65**	0.13	2.37**
Self-esteem							-0.18	-3.61**
R^2	0.14		0.19		0.19		0.19	
F	10.69		14.88		13.04		11.44	

Note: * *. At the 0.01 level (two-tailed), the correlation is significant.

Table 3: Analyses of the chain-mediated effects of Self-focused attention and self-esteem

| Item	Effect value	Standard error	Confidence interval		Relative mediated effect
			Lower limit	Upper limit	
Total indirect effect	0.12	0.03	0.06	0.19	30.95%
Social exclusion → self-focused attention → social anxiety	0.05	0.03	0.01	0.11	13.44%
Social exclusion → self-esteem → social anxiety	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.09	12.83%
Social exclusion → self-focused attention → self-esteem → social anxiety	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.04	4.68%
Direct effect	0.26	0.05	0.15	0.36	69.05%
Total effect	0.37	0.05	0.28	0.47	1
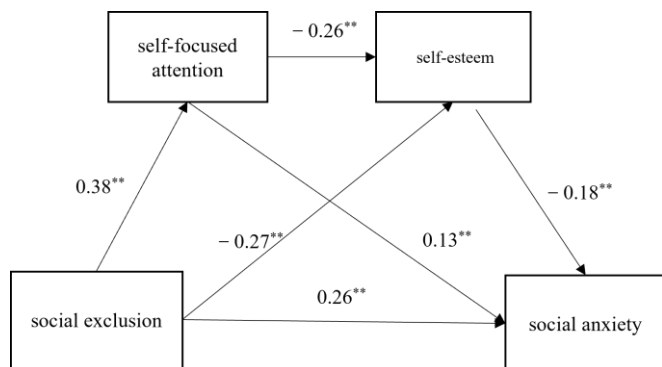
Figure 1: Chain mediating effect model diagram

4. Discussion

4.1 Discussion of the Direct Effect of Social Exclusion on Social Anxiety

In this study, a mediation model was constructed to comprehensively explore the effects of environmental, individual, and cognitive factors on social anxiety. The results of this study indicate that social exclusion has a positive predictive effect on social anxiety, which is consistent with the results of previous studies [30][31]. The temporal need-threat model of social exclusion [9] states that individuals suffering from exclusion first enter the reflexive stage, which is specifically characterized by a threat to needs such as belonging and self-esteem. Human beings are highly socialized individuals with the basic need to belong, and it is the instinctive need of human beings to establish good social relationships and seek a sense of belonging [32]. When an individual suffers from social rejection, it threatens the individual's basic need to belong, causing the individual to have certain cognitive biases, and psychologically producing anxiety and frustration, thus hindering the development of social interaction skills, i.e., the higher the degree of social rejection an individual encounters, the higher the likelihood of the individual's social anxiety.

4.2 Analysis of Chain-mediated Effects of Self-focus and Self-esteem

It was found that a chain mediation model can be developed to account for the relationship between social exclusion and social anxiety, and the mediating effect mechanisms of self-focused attention and self-esteem were described. Firstly, the research data showed that self-focused attention is a mediating variable for social exclusion to predict social anxiety, which verified hypothesis 2. This study showed that social exclusion positively predicts self-focused attention, which is consistent with the findings of Wang Ziwei et al. [33] Individuals will pursue the improvement of personal efficacy after encountering social exclusion. They need to affirm their self-ability and value. The sense of control, power and ability will help to reduce the impact of social exclusion, and their follow-up behavior will pay more attention to themselves. Individuals with high self-focused concern will shift their attention to self-relevant information in the face of social threats, and will be more aware of and monitor their internal information [18]. The results of the present study indicate that self-focused concern positively predicts social anxiety, consistent with existing research [34]. Individuals' over-attention to threatening cues can lead to increased levels of self-

monitoring and decreased problem-solving abilities, and if individuals focus on their own failures or negative thoughts of low self-worth it can cause a bias in self-perception [35]; which implies that individuals over-attend to their own negative information when they want to present them or their personal information to others, but they are unsure if they have done a good job of presenting it. This may cause social anxiety to develop. In general, individuals will pursue the improvement of personal efficacy after encountering social exclusion, that is, higher self-focused attention, which will lead individuals to pay too much attention to their own negative information and even increase social anxiety.

Secondly, the research data show that self-esteem is a mediating variable for social exclusion to predict social anxiety, which verifies Hypothesis 3. Social exclusion significantly negatively predicted self-esteem, which was consistent with the research results of Lei et al. [36]. The need threat model holds that the individual 's need for self-esteem is not met after experiencing social exclusion, and shows withdrawal behavior, accompanied by a sense of worthlessness, so the level of self-esteem is low. Individuals with low self-esteem often doubt their own ability and are more likely to be self-deprecating, which compresses the elastic space provided by the self-regulation mechanism of self-esteem [2]. The protective effect of self-esteem cannot be exerted normally, which makes it impossible for individuals to effectively get rid of and alleviate anxiety in social situations, so the level of social anxiety is high. In general, individuals with high levels of social exclusion, low levels of self-experience, will have lower self-esteem, and individuals with low levels of self-esteem, in the face of tense interpersonal relationships, tend to adopt traditional inherent thinking patterns and negative coping styles, resulting in higher anxiety.

Finally, when examining the relationship between social exclusion and social anxiety, a chain of mediators from self-focused attention to self-esteem was also found, validating Hypothesis 4. Individuals at the university level are rapidly differentiating their sense of self, paying more attention to their social attributes, paying more attention to their inner feelings and their performance in interactions, and caring about the impression they will give to others, and any view and evaluation lower than their own expectations will decrease their self-esteem in social interactions. Any viewpoints and evaluations that are lower than one's expectations in social interactions will lower one's self-esteem. Liu Gang and Du Yanjie found in the study of low self-esteem that the deep root of low self-esteem lies in the alienation of individuals' self-focused attention [37], a and inferiority will reduce the level of individual self-esteem. Individuals with a high level of self-focused attention are more likely to look at themselves negatively, which will lead to the lowering of individuals' self-esteem [38]. The data from the present study showed that self-focused attention negatively predicted self-esteem, which is generally consistent with the results of previous studies. In general, individuals with higher levels of social exclusion are more likely to pursue a higher sense of personal efficacy, and their behaviors are manifested in higher levels of self-focused attention; individuals with high levels of self-focused attention are more likely to view themselves negatively, which leads to lower levels of self-esteem;

individuals with low levels of self-esteem tend to doubt their own abilities, are more likely to engage in self-depreciation, and are more likely to have a higher level of social anxiety in the face of social environment.

5. Conclusions and Shortcomings

This study draws the following conclusions: 1) Social exclusion significantly positively predicts social anxiety; 2) Self-focused attention has a mediating effect between social exclusion and social anxiety; 3) Self-esteem plays a mediating role between social exclusion and social anxiety; 4) Self-focused attention and self-esteem have a chain mediating effect between social exclusion and social anxiety.

There are still some shortcomings in this study. First of all, this study adopts the questionnaire survey method to study the relationship between college students ' social exclusion, self-focused attention, self-esteem and social anxiety. It belongs to the cross-sectional study, and cannot speculate and estimate the logical causal relationship between each variable. Therefore, the research results have certain limitations. In the future, longitudinal research can be used to further explore the impact of college students ' social exclusion on social anxiety and the mechanism of action. Secondly, the results of this study show that the relative mediating effect value of the chain mediating path is small, and one of the possible reasons for reflection is due to the small amount of questionnaire survey. According to Fang Jie et al. ' s review of the mediating effect, it is pointed out that the use of the mediating effect amount requires a large sample [39]. Therefore, the number of questionnaires collected should be increased in future cross-sectional studies.

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