

ANXIETY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EXPRESSION OF COGNITIVE STYLES

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Abstract

Anxiety is one of the key problems of a person's mental health, which retains its relevance along with the development of society. It is no coincidence that in recent years, psychologists, philosophers, historians, and researchers in other social science disciplines have been paying increasing attention to the issue of anxiety.

Within the framework of this study, psychological and anthropological theoretical approaches to the characterisation of anxiety were presented, and directions for revealing the level of anxiety were emphasised. The characteristics of anxiety were presented within the framework of the methodology for applying cognitive styles.

The article examines anxiety levels—specifically trait and state anxiety—among individuals aged 20 to 40. These anxiety levels were compared with the cognitive styles of impulsivity and reflexivity. The study revealed links between high levels of trait anxiety and impulsivity, which resulted in distorted decision-making and non-constructive solutions. The findings may be applied in cognitive psychotherapeutic interventions aimed at reducing anxiety levels.

Keywords: anxiety, cognitive styles, impulsivity, reflexivity, decision-making, trait anxiety, state anxiety.

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ԱՆԺԵԼԻԿԱ ԱՅՎԱԶՅԱՆ

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ գիտակրթական միջազգային կենտրոնի դոցենտ,
հոգեբանական գիտությունների թեկնածու

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Համառոտագիր

Տագնապայնությունը անձի հոգեկան առողջության առանցքային հիմնախնդիրներից է, որը պահպանում է իր արդիականությունը հասարակության զարգացման հետ զուգընթաց: Պատահական չէ, որ վերջին տարիներին հոգեբանները, փիլիսոփաները, պատմաբանները և հասարակագիտական այլ դիսցիպլինների հետազոտողներ ավելի ու ավելի մեծ ուշադրություն են դարձնում տագնապայնության խնդրին:

Այս ուսումնասիրության շրջանակում ներկայացվել են հոգեբանական և մարդաբանական տեսական մոտեցումները տագնապայնության բնութագրման վերաբերյալ, շեշտադրվել են տագնապայնության մակարդակի վերհանման ուղղությունները: Տագնապայնության բնութագրումները ներկայացվել են կոգնիտիվ ոճերի կիրառման մեթոդաբանության ներքո:

Հոդվածում 20–40 տարեկան անձանց շրջանում վեր են հանվել տագնապայնության մակարդակներն՝ ըստ անձնային և իրավիճակային տագնապայնության տեսակների: Տագնապայնության բացահայտված մակարդակները համեմատվել են իմպուլսիվության, ռեֆլեքսիվության կոգնիտիվ ոճերի հետ: Հետազոտության արդյունքում ի հայտ են եկել կապեր անձնային տագնապայնության և իմպուլսիվության բարձր մակարդակների միջև, որոնք հանգեցնում էին որոշումների կայացման ձևախեղումներին և ոչ կոնստրուկտիվ լուծումներին: Հետազոտության արդյունքները կարող են կիրառելի լինել կոգնիտիվ հոգեթերապևտիկ աշխատանքներում՝ ուղղված տագնապայնության մակարդակի նվազեցմանը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ տագնապայնություն, կոգնիտիվ ոճեր, իմպուլսիվություն, ռեֆլեքսիվություն, որոշումների կայացում, անձնային տագնապայնություն, իրավիճակային տագնապայնություն:

Introduction

The issue of anxiety is a key point not only for psychologists but also for philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and other specialists in the humanities and social sciences. Scholars deeply interested in the themes of anxiety and fear generally did not seek to create abstract systems; instead, they were more concerned with the existential conflicts and crises that accompany human life. It is no coincidence that philosophical ideas and concepts have shaped the modern understanding of anxiety. Since many philosophers could not overlook the prob-

lem of anxiety, it is logical that the most profound insights into this issue come from those who, alongside philosophy, were also interested in its psychological dimensions. The contemporary understanding of anxiety increasingly focuses on the study of behavioural patterns and their associated cognitive processes. Consequently, a key issue in the study of individual anxiety has become the examination of decision-making mechanisms under anxious conditions. To identify trends in decision-making, it is essential to determine the various cognitive styles an individual employs when experiencing anxiety.

We need to examine psychological theoretical approaches—including an analysis of philosophical and phenomenological perspectives on anxiety—for two reasons:

1. First, it is evident that a profound understanding of the nature of anxiety is made possible by a philosophical perspective on the forms of personality development in modern society. For instance, Kierkegaard not only anticipated many of Freud's concepts but, in a sense, even foresaw the future evolution of his ideas.
2. This enables us to consider the problem of anxiety within a methodological context. An individual's experience of anxiety is determined by their position at a specific stage of personal development; consequently, to understand the manifestations of anxiety—as well as the development and transformation of the associated cognitive styles—it is essential to consider the fundamental concepts of anxiety that remain relevant today.

Theoretical and Methodological Bases

Anxiety, from a philosophical point of view, arises when a person realises that he exists in the condition of the inevitable possibility of non-existence. This, as we can see, is similar to Kierkegaard's (1985) idea that anxiety is «the fear of nothingness.» «Non-existence» is not simply the fear of physical death, although death is perhaps the most common object and symbol of anxiety. The threat of non-existence belongs to the religious and spiritual sphere of life, since it is the fear of the meaninglessness of existence. Usually the threat of meaninglessness is perceived as a threat to the Self. But when a person accepts the challenge of this anxiety, when he sees the threat of the meaninglessness of existence and resists this threat, he feels his own Self more strongly. This sharpens the perception of the person, which is directed towards himself, towards his own being, which is different from the world of non-being or the world of objects.

As noted by Kabat-Zinn (1990), anxiety as a character trait differs from anxiety in that he who sometimes experiences a feeling of fear is not necessarily always anxious, and the anxious person is necessarily afraid. Thus, an individual who is characterised by the excitation of the sympathetic nervous system and anxiety (anxietas) will not experience sympathetic excitation under certain circumstances (a quiet home environment, calm, etc.). Conversely, someone who is not characterised by anxiety will exhibit strong anger in situations that cause

strong fear; i.e., he responds to certain situations with the excitation of the sympathetic nervous system. These two variables are interrelated, and the presence of anxiety predisposes to the manifestation of anger (Craske & Barlow, 2007; Barlow & Craske, 2006).

In the work of Horwitz (2010), we see that fear can be overcome through reason. Horwitz considered fear to be a purely subjective matter, a matter of a person's mental state or attitude. He contrasts fear with hope, both of which, according to him, characterise a person in doubt, and he believed that an emotion can be overcome only by an opposing emotion stronger than the first.

In Kierkegaard's book (1985), anxiety appears only in connection with human freedom. Freedom is the goal of human development; from a psychological point of view, "well-being is freedom." He states that anxiety is the state of a person who has faced his freedom. He even claims that anxiety is "the possibility of freedom. As he wrote " Every time a person imagines possibilities, anxiety is present at the same time (Kierkegaard, 1985).

Individuation is achieved by facing one's own anxiety. And anxiety inevitably arises in situations where it is necessary to confront the external world, and not just to conform to one's surroundings. According to Hallam (1992), anxiety is always accompanied by a feeling of guilt, since both are connected with the realisation of possibilities, and the higher the creative potential of a person, the more capable he is of experiencing anxiety and guilt.

Developments in psychological approaches have led to the formation of descriptions and definitions of anxiety in the psychological sciences. According to the Explanatory Dictionary of the Armenian Language (Gyurjinyan, 2022), anxiety is explained as follows:

1. Anxiety, excitement, unrest;
2. The most dangerous, decisive moment of an illness, followed by death or recovery, crisis;
3. Tense, dangerous situation, difficult situation;
4. Terror, horror;
5. Panic, commotion, confusion;
6. Overproduction of goods that periodically appears in capitalist countries, crisis;
7. A warning signal of impending danger;
8. Joy, doom;
9. Excitement, rush, haste;
10. Grief, pain;
11. Danger, disaster;
12. An acute lack of something.

The Cambridge English Dictionary (Cambridge Online Dictionary) defines anxiety as follows:

1. an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness or worry about something that

- is happening at the moment or that may happen in the future.
- 2. something that causes a feeling of fear and anxiety.
- 3. a medical condition in which a person feels constant fear and anxiety.

American Psychological Association (2021) presented anxiety as a psychological state of a person that arises in a dangerous situation. Some authors (Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 2015; Kroenke et al., 2001) wrote about three types of anxiety: objective, neurotic, and moral. Objective anxiety arises under the influence of real threats to a person’s psychological well-being. Neurotic anxiety arises from the awareness of dangers arising from the It. Moral anxiety arises as a result of the fear of earning moral condemnation from someone. Moral anxiety is associated with feelings of guilt and shame. The term anxiety is close to the meaning and concept of the word anxiety. However, in the latter case, it is not only a mental state, but also a corresponding trait of a person’s temperament (Tucker & Warr, 1996; Löwe et al., 2008).

Fear and anxiety are fundamental aspects of human existence. Anxiety is a state of mind that is directed toward the future and is caused by mental processes that cause worry. When we worry, our minds focus on the future and what could go wrong. This is, in a sense, an adaptive response that helps us prepare for possible future undesirable situations.

In his book “Counselling for Anxiety Problems,” Hallam (1992) presents the commonalities surrounding the word “anxiety,” which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Anxiety statements

1	Components of negative experience described in a terminological sequence with the poles “tension” – “horror”
2	Awareness of imminent danger or harm, regardless of whether it is possible to actually identify their sources
3	An experience of physical sensations, primarily associated with activation of the autonomic nervous system
4	Urgent need for safe haven
5	Decreased fine motor control
6	Disturbing or unpleasant thoughts that are difficult to control
7	Inability to think logically or act systematically in unusual, conflictual, or dangerous situations

Almost all areas of theoretical psychology – theories of innate biological defences, stress models, self-awareness, social evaluation, behaviour, cognitive abilities, problem solving, learning, etc. – can be used to describe anxiety. Anxiety is a negative mood state, often accompanied by physical symptoms, called physiological tone, characterised by nervousness, apprehension, and

gloomy ideas about the future, as well as emotional (fear, sadness, anger) and behavioural (avoidance of anxiety-provoking situations and objects) reactions (Rollins & Genser, 1977; Pennebaker, 2012). According to Hofmann and Smits (2008), fear is considered a basic and independent emotion, and anxiety is a combination of several emotions: sadness, guilt, fear, shame. The authors also note that the combination of interest and fear produces anxiety. There are three broad categories of diagnosable anxiety disorders, all of which are treatable:

- Anxiety: specific phobias, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, agoraphobia, and generalised anxiety disorder
- Obsessive-compulsive and related disorders
- Traumatic and stress-related disorders (Hofmann & Smits, 2008).

Horney (1950) noted the importance of childhood in a person's emotional development and linked it to the pathological conditions of life in the family, where the child does not feel safe, loved, and appreciated. As a result, the child develops a "base anxiety," a sense of helplessness in the face of a hostile world, which he tries to alleviate by developing defensive strategies such as the desire for love, the desire for power, or alienation. Because these strategies are incompatible, they are doomed to fail: they create a vicious circle, as the means we use to alleviate anxiety, on the contrary, intensifies it. From Horney's point of view, if the child's desire for love and attachment is not satisfied by adults, the child feels unloved, lonely, unnecessary, and helpless in the cold and hostile world around him and experiences anxiety. Anxiety develops in him, which turns into a stable personality quality. To overcome this anxiety, Horney identifies three possible ways: trying to earn adults' love and approval; trying to force adults to love him, or at least be wary of him; and isolating himself from his surroundings. However, these options are not effective and lead to the formation of neurotic personalities: submissive, aggressive, or isolated (Horney, 1950).

Horney (1950) offers a list of needs that are seen as solutions to the problem of broken relationships. She calls these needs "neurotic" because they represent an irrational solution to the problem.

1. Neurotic need for love and approval. This need is characterised by a strong desire to please others and meet their expectations.
2. Neurotic need for a "partner-caretaker". A person with this need is a parasite. He overvalues love and is extremely afraid of being abandoned and left alone.
3. Neurotic need for a narrow limitation of life. Such a person is not demanding, is content with little, prefers to remain inconspicuous and values modesty above all.
4. Neurotic need for power. This need is manifested by the desire for strength for the sake of strength, expressed in disrespect for others, indiscriminate praise of strength, and contempt for weakness.

5. A neurotic desire to exploit others.
6. A neurotic need to be significant. In this case, a person's self-esteem depends on the level of public recognition.
7. A neurotic need to be an object of admiration. People with this type of need have an "inflated" image of themselves and want to be admired in accordance with this image.
8. A neurotic desire for personal achievement. Such people want to be the best.
9. A neurotic need for self-sufficiency and independence. Having lost faith in the possibility of warm, satisfying relationships with others, a person isolates himself and refuses to be attached to anyone or anything. He becomes a "loner."
10. Neurotic need for perfection and perfectionism. Fearing mistakes and criticism, they try to become invulnerable and infallible, constantly looking for flaws in themselves in order to hide them before they become obvious to others.

Each of these groups represents a basic orientation towards others and towards themselves. Horney finds the basis of internal conflict in the differences between these orientations. Normal and neurotic conflicts differ in their degree. From her point of view, we are endowed with the potential for development, the desire for self-improvement, and this is the fundamental aspiration of man (Horney, 1950).

May (1983) offers his own point of view on this issue, adding that it is connected to the nature of the parent's "love" for the child. If their "love" is essentially a desire to use the child for personal gain, then the child will identify with strength or, conversely, with weakness. May (1981) defines anxiety as the subjective state of a person who understands that his existence can be destroyed, that he can turn into "nothingness". He believed that anxiety can take different forms, manifesting itself in different degrees of intensity, since it is a person's basic response to a threat to his existence or to some value that he associates with his existence. Anxiety also arises when we encounter obstacles in the way of realising our plans and possibilities. This resistance can cause stagnation and decline, but it can also stimulate change and growth. Freedom cannot exist without anxiety, just as anxiety cannot exist without the realisation of the possibility of freedom. Becoming freer, a person inevitably experiences anxiety. May quoted Kierkegaard as saying that "anxiety is the dizziness caused by freedom" (May, 1981; May, 1983). He presented certain definitions of types of anxiety.

Normal anxiety: May (1981) defined normal anxiety as a non-stressful, non-compromising anxiety that can be consciously confronted constructively. As long as normal anxiety is proportionate to the threat, it is constructive. Otherwise, anxiety becomes a painful, neurotic type.

Neurotic anxiety: May (1981) defined neurotic anxiety as a disproportionate

response to threat that produces depression and other types of intrapsychic conflict and various types of controlled blocking-off of actions and concepts. Neurotic anxiety visits us if the values we question are in fact dogmas, the rejection of which would lead to the loss of meaning in our existence.

Guilt: The feeling of anxiety increases when we are faced with the problem of realising our potential. When we deny opportunities, fail to recognise the needs of our loved ones, or ignore our dependence on the world around us, the feeling of guilt increases (May, 1981). Thus, according to May's theory, anxiety is a fear that is expressed as a threat to some values that an individual considers important for his personality.

As we can see, most researchers tend to consider anxiety as a human response to uncertainty, and fear as a signal that represents a clear danger. Thus, we can associate anxiety with general excitement, in particular, with the activation of the sympathetic nervous system, and fear with the inhibition of actions and the activation of the parasympathetic nervous system, in the case of a large dose of which a person can become paralyzed. Below we will present the features of anxiety from the point of view of psychological theories, since it is one of the main problems of human existence and by understanding it, we will come closer to understanding the causes of anxiety and neurosis (Beck & Emery, 2005; Davidson & McEwen, 2012). Rozencwajg (2003) saw the essence of neurosis in the contradiction between the feeling of inferiority and the desire for self-assertion, the thirst for power. In the neurotic state, he saw a feeling of weakness and helplessness, which he presented as an "inferiority complex."

Methodology and Methods

The study of anxiety levels and cognitive styles of impulsivity/reflexivity was conducted based on the methodological approaches of Kagan (1966) and Spielberger (1989). Kagan's Matching Familiar Figures Test measures an individual's tendency to make decisions quickly or slowly. The subject is presented with 2 training sheets, then 12 main sheets, each with an image of an object at the top and 8 almost identical images of the same object arranged in two rows below, of which only one is completely identical to the reference image. The subject must find and mark the image that is completely identical to the reference image. This trait is most pronounced in situations of uncertainty and anxiety, when a person must make the right choice from a set of defined alternatives. A high level of impulsivity reflects an individual's tendency to react quickly in situations with multiple options, coming up with a solution without analysing all possible alternatives. Individuals with a reflective cognitive style are characterised by a slow reaction time in such situations; they test and repeatedly analyse solution options, and make the final decision based on a thorough preliminary analysis of the alternatives.

Research on impulsivity and reflexivity shows that a reflective cognitive style is characterised by a long reaction time when making decisions and a low

error rate, meaning the individual carefully considers available alternatives before deciding. As a result, the individual reacts slowly but makes the most appropriate decision in a given situation. An impulsive cognitive style, by contrast, is characterised by a short reaction time when making decisions and a high error rate. This means that when faced with a decision between available alternatives, the individual acts quickly without properly evaluating the potential of alternative solutions. As a result, the individual reacts quickly but makes the least appropriate decision in a given situation (Zhang, 2002; Borkowski et al., 1983).

The Spielberger Anxiety Scale (*State-Trait Anxiety Inventory*, STAI) identifies two types of anxiety: state anxiety and trait anxiety. The scale ranges from 20 to 80 points, calculated based on the sum of respondents' responses. The higher the score, the greater the level of state anxiety and trait anxiety. The classification of anxiety levels in both types is based on grouping scores into three levels, where low anxiety is defined as a score of up to 30 points, moderate anxiety is defined as a score of 31–44 points, and high anxiety is defined as a score of 45 points or higher.

Research on impulsivity/reflexivity, along with anxiety level, allows us to identify ties between a particular cognitive style and the level and nature of anxiety. Therefore, we conducted an empirical study of cognitive styles that considered not only the individual's anxiety level but also how of manifests. Based on this assumption, a scientific hypothesis was put forward about the dependence of the manifestation of the cognitive style of impulsivity/reflexivity on the level of severity of situational (state)/personal (trait) anxiety.

The study's hypothesis was that there are certain connections between the level of trait anxiety and impulsivity. Under conditions of high levels of both trait and situational anxiety, impulsivity is expressed not only by a quick reaction to a troubling situation but also by a low rate of correct, adequate decisions. With high levels of trait anxiety and low levels of situational anxiety, a high level of impulsivity persists, but with a higher proportion of correct decisions.

To examine anxiety levels and impulsivity/reflexivity, we conducted an empirical study among a general sample of 20–40-year-olds (N=90). The study's goal was to identify connections between anxiety levels and the cognitive style of impulsivity.

Results

Empirical results obtained using the Spielberger method made it possible to identify subgroups within the total sample of respondents characterized in Table 1.

Table 2.

Levels of trait anxiety, %

Subgroups by levels of trait anxiety	Percentage figures
Subgroup 1: High level of trait anxiety	35%
Subgroup 2: Moderate level of trait anxiety	45%
Subgroup 3: Low level of trait anxiety	20%

The level of state anxiety was analysed and determined within each of these subgroups. Thus, respondents in each subgroup—categorised by trait anxiety levels—exhibited varying levels of state anxiety. Percentage figures of Subgroup 1 sample are presented in Table 2.

Table 3.

Levels of state anxiety in Subgroup 1, %

Levels of state anxiety in Subgroup 1	Percentage figures
High state anxiety level	50%
Moderate state anxiety level	45%
Low state anxiety level	5%

Percentage figures of Subgroup 2 sample are presented in Table 3.

Table 4.

Levels of state anxiety in Subgroup 2, %

Levels of state anxiety in Subgroup 2	Percentage figures
High state anxiety level	25%
Moderate state anxiety level	65%
Low state anxiety level	10%

Percentage figures of Subgroup 3 sample are presented in Table 4.

Table 5.

Levels of state anxiety in Subgroup 3, %

Levels of state anxiety in Subgroup 3	Percentage figures
High state anxiety level	35%
Moderate state anxiety level	35%
Low state anxiety level	30%

As can be seen from the data presented in Tables 1–4, the percentages indicating a high level of situational anxiety rise in tandem with the indicators of trait anxiety. In other words, the higher the level of trait anxiety, the more pronounced the level of situational anxiety.

To identify the relationship between anxiety levels and the cognitive styles of impulsivity and reflectivity, the results of the Spielberger inventory were compared with empirical data obtained using the Kagan test (Figures 1–3).

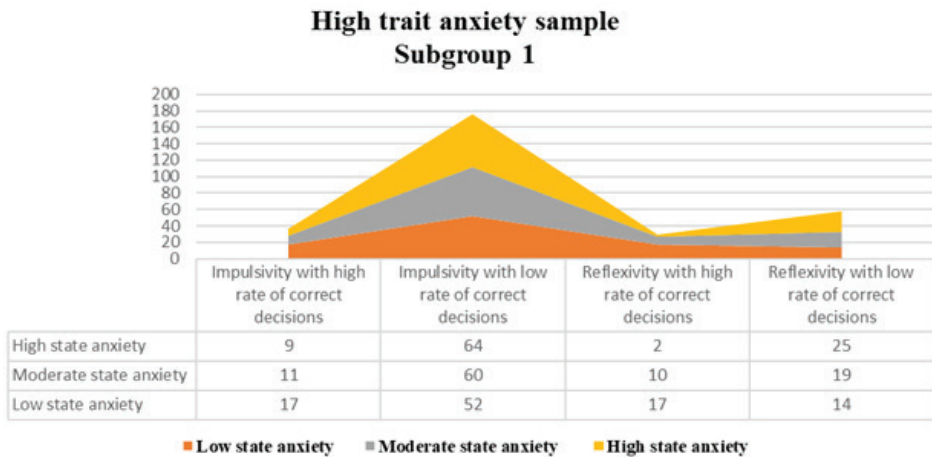


Figure 1. Percentage figures of state anxiety in Subgroup 1

The results presented in Figure 1 indicate a high level of impulsive cognitive style associated with a low rate of correct decisions in a specific situation. This points to a link between high personal anxiety and an individual's ability to respond adequately in the given situation.

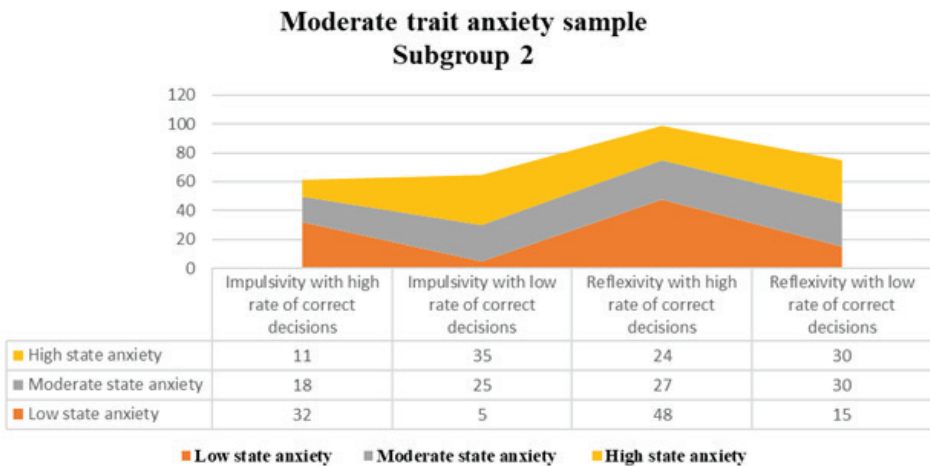


Figure 2. Percentage figures of state anxiety in Subgroup 2

As shown in Figure 2, the reflexivity factor is notably enhanced in the subgroup with a moderate level of trait anxiety, particularly among respondents with a low level of state anxiety. As the level of state anxiety increases, a weakening of the reflexive cognitive style is observed, alongside an increase in impulsivity and a concomitant low rate of correct decision-making.

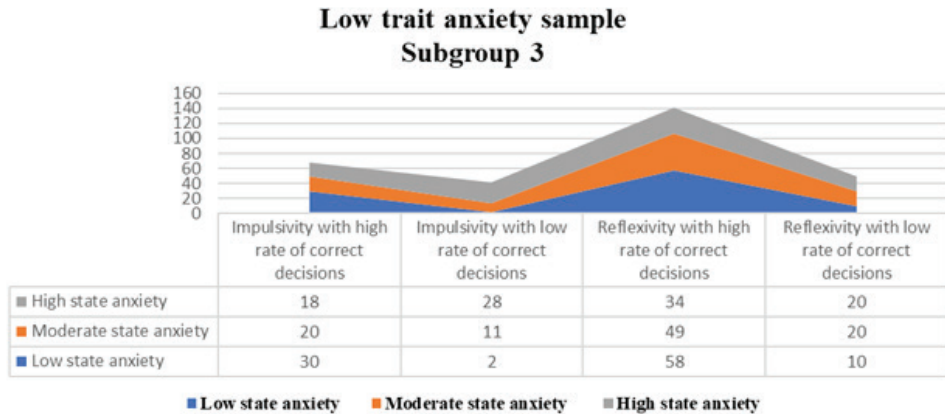


Figure 3. Percentage figures of state anxiety in Subgroup 3

As shown in Figure 3, respondents in the subgroup with low levels of trait anxiety predominantly employ a reflective cognitive style, which intensifies as the level of state anxiety within this subgroup decreases.

The results of the empirical study revealed certain trends in the manifestation of the impulsivity/reflexivity cognitive styles, leading to the following conclusions.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of anxiety is a psychological concept encompassing issues of personal self-control, the realisation of personal potential, and personal growth. The wide range of definitions for anxiety stems from the diversity of theoretical approaches to studying this phenomenon. Contemporary understanding of anxiety aligns with Rollo May's definitions regarding normal and neurotic levels of anxiety, suggesting that anxiety is viewed as an integral part of human life.

Research into anxiety within the context of cognitive styles has revealed certain contemporary trends in the understanding of this phenomenon. First, it should be noted that the study results showed a predominantly high level of trait anxiety among respondents aged 20 to 40. This finding suggests a shift in modern society regarding what constitutes a normal or positive level of anxiety; neurotic manifestations of anxiety are becoming so widespread that they are taking on the characteristics of the norm. This is evidenced by the prevalence of high trait anxiety, which, in turn, manifests as an emphasis on state anxiety. This transfor-

mation in the perception of anxiety is occurring alongside developments in the understanding of cognitive styles. Specifically, the study examined the impulsivity/reflectivity cognitive styles, comparing their modes of expression with levels of trait and state anxiety. The study also concluded that the impulsive cognitive style predominates, leading to decisions that are incorrect or inappropriate for the given situation. This pattern is particularly pronounced in conditions of high trait and state anxiety. A limitation of this study relates to age factors; including other age groups in future research would make it possible to identify anxiety levels and trends in the transformation of cognitive styles across different age demographics.

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