PP. 08-20

Journal of Psychological and Education Studies
Volume (41), Number (1), November 2025

ISSN : 2602-7283

Exam Anxiety: Facilitating vs Debilitating Effects A Theoretical and Analytical Review of Field Studies

Behir Hamza[1*], Berrazouane Haciba[2]

[1]University of Algiers 2 – Abou El Kacem Saâdallah – (Algeria), hamza.behir@univ-alger2.dz

[2] Higher school for teachers of deaf and mute (Algeria), hberraz@gmail.com

Received: 25 / 08 / 2024 **Accepted: 22 / 11 / 2024** **Published: 30 / 11 / 2025**

Abstract:

The current study aimed to explore the level of exam anxiety among students, particularly focusing on middle and high school students, by reviewing, analyzing, and comparing various scientific studies on exam anxiety levels. Additionally, it examined the theoretical aspects of the variable, including its definitions, characteristics, types, causes, symptoms, and various strategies and methods used to reduce and manage high exam anxiety. The study found that students exhibit a high level of exam anxiety, as supported by the review of multiple prior studies in this context.

Based on these findings, it is essential for researchers, specialists, and relevant stakeholders to prioritize the development and adaptation of guidance and therapeutic programs designed to reduce exam anxiety. Moreover, fostering positive school environments that encourage healthy emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development among students is critical. Such environments can promote mental health and personal well-being, mitigating the negative effects of anxiety and preventing academic failure.

Keywords: Anxiety; Exam Anxiety; Students.

***Corresponding author**

1. Introduction

Exam anxiety is a prevalent academic issue that affects many students, with significant negative impacts on their psychological, physical, and academic well-being. Seiber (1980) described exam anxiety as a state of distress and tension specifically related to taking exams, which can either enhance or impair performance. While motivating anxiety encourages students to strive for success, debilitating anxiety undermines their performance. This form of anxiety is often marked by heightened self-awareness and feelings of helplessness, leading to poor exam outcomes.

Anxiety, whether as a psychological trait or a temporary state, can vary widely in its impact. Excessively high levels of anxiety can be harmful, while too little can result in indifference, cognitive inhibition, and behavioral passivity, all of which threaten academic achievement. However, at moderate, natural levels, anxiety can serve as a beneficial psychological mechanism that helps individuals avoid danger and achieve their goals. In this sense, anxiety can motivate students to focus more on their studies and put in extra effort during revision, acting as a positive driving force. On the other hand, excessive anxiety can have detrimental effects, such as pre-exam low self-esteem, loss of appetite, insomnia, difficulty concentrating, distraction, irritability, and other negative conditions. In the exam room, students may experience physical symptoms like trembling and an increased heart rate, which can severely impact their performance, leading to poor grades and possibly losing the chance to enter their desired college.

In this theoretical research, we will explore the variable of exam anxiety among students by reviewing various studies that have investigated the levels of this important variable among students. Additionally, we will present different definitional frameworks related to the topic to provide an understanding of this type of anxiety and how to diagnose and manage it through the various scientific strategies available in this field. Understanding this distinction can help provide more accurate psychological support to those suffering from exam anxiety in the future.

2. Research Problem

Anxiety is one of the most common psychological phenomena that has attracted the attention of modern psychologists, becoming increasingly noticeable among individuals due to the challenging and complex conditions of life. Anxiety is a fundamental aspect of human existence and a dynamic component in personality development. However, this trait primarily signifies a person's failure to adapt and adjust to

the demands of the modern age, marked by scientific and technological advancements (Idham, 2020, p. 496).

Exam anxiety is a specific type of anxiety that occurs in test situations, prevalent among students at various educational levels. It is often considered a significant issue that needs to be scientifically identified and addressed from multiple perspectives (Sayhi, 2012, p. 74).

In this context, Kidson and Hornblow (1982) argue that exam-related anxiety is one of the most prominent sources of anxiety among students at all levels. Exam anxiety, being associated with academic situations, is a problem that can negatively affect a student's psychological and physical health (Kidson & Hornblow, 1982, p. 248).

Numerous researchers have focused on analyzing the experience of anxiety to understand its core components. Several studies, such as those by Morris and Liebert (1967), Sarson and Spielberger (1975), Spielberger (1967), Morris, Davis, and Hutchings (1981), Mohamed Abdel-Zaher Al-Tayeb (1984), and Ali Mahmoud Shuaib (1987), Have aimed to clarify the components of exam anxiety. These studies, using factor analysis, have revealed that exam anxiety consists of at least two main components: worry, also referred to as a concern or preoccupation, and emotionality (Sayhi, 2012, p. 69).

Given its significance and scientific priority, numerous studies have investigated exam anxiety. For instance, Eysenck's (1979) study explored the impact of anxiety on individuals, concluding that anxiety reduces the levels of concentration and attention, which are crucial factors for successful exam performance (as cited in Hamzawi, 2018, p. 184). Additionally, Bouljaj conducted a study on 100 students regarding exam anxiety and perceptions of success and failure among final-year students, finding a correlational relationship between the two variables (Bouljaj, 2014, p. 113).

Moreover, a study by Merzaq et al (2023, p. 237) emphasized the importance of research in this area. The study aimed to explore the relationship between psychological resilience and exam anxiety among high school students (baccalaureate level), involving 250 participants. The findings indicated a statistically significant negative correlation between exam anxiety and psychological resilience.

Spielberger summarizes the findings of several studies by stating that individuals with high anxiety levels exhibit emotional reactions and adopt thinking strategies that hinder performance. Students with

high exam anxiety tend to blame themselves for poor performance, responding to the situation with increased focus and motivation (as cited in Rashdan, 1993, p. 11). Conversely, Spielberger (1980) mentions that exam anxiety increases for students aspiring to specific university studies or hard-to-attain jobs. For these students, exam performance is crucial to achieving their goals, and the more the exam performance is linked to reaching the desired goal, the higher the level of anxiety (as cited in Bouljaj, 2014, p. 116).

In support of the notion that exam anxiety is high among students, Bouatra Faiza's (2020) study aimed to determine the level of exam anxiety among third-year high school students in light of certain variables. The study found that the level of exam anxiety was very high among the sample of 200 individuals (p. 1). In a similar vein, Ali and Ghrib (2023) conducted a study to reveal the level of exam anxiety among students preparing for the Baccalaureate exam and its relationship with gender and academic specialization. The study, which involved a sample of 158 students from Tiaret Province, found that exam anxiety levels were high among the participants (p. 129). Supporting this realistic perspective, Talha, Sultani, and Badran's (2020) study examined the role of online education in reducing exam anxiety among Baccalaureate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study concluded that the students' level of exam anxiety was high (p. 235). Several researchers have also delved into the levels of exam anxiety among university students, who have successfully passed the Baccalaureate exam, such as Abdullah Kamal's (2011) study. This study explored the relationship between exam anxiety and failure among students at the Higher School of Teachers, considering variables such as profile, academic level, and specialization. The study confirmed that students at the Higher School in Bouzaréah experience exam anxiety across various specializations, profiles, and academic levels, with a relationship between this anxiety and academic failure (p. 87). However, Chriq Wiza's (2017, p. 191) study contradicted the previous studies by finding that the level of exam anxiety was moderate among the sample of fourth-year middle school students in Boumerdes Province, consisting of 97 students.

Based on the previous discussion of various approaches to studying exam anxiety among students, we can pose the following question:

- What is the level of exam anxiety among students preparing for exams?

3.Hypotheses

- The level of exam anxiety is high among students preparing for exams.

4. Objectives of the study

- ✓ Investigating the level of exam anxiety among students preparing for exams.
- ✓ Focusing on the aspects of discomfort and deficiency among students preparing for exams.
- ✓ Emphasizing the positive aspect of exam anxiety at its moderate, motivating level.

5. Defining Exam Anxiety

5.1. Linguistic Definition of Anxiety

According to Ibn Manzur's *Lisan Al-Arab* dictionary, anxiety refers to discomfort. It is said, "He spent the night anxious," meaning he was disturbed, and "He was made anxious by another," meaning someone else disturbed him. The word (anxiety) implies movement and restlessness, where something does not settle in one place and is continuously disturbed (as cited in Abdullah Kamal, 2011, p. 10).

5.2. Terminological Definition of Anxiety

Bandura et al. (1987) defined anxiety as "an increased sense of apprehension in situations and events perceived by the individual as beyond their control, accompanied by feelings of discomfort, fear, and anticipation of harm, along with physiological changes varying in intensity depending on the level of tension experienced by the person" (Al-Aboudi & Al-Saadi, 2022, p. 288). Accordingly, anxiety is an emotional response resulting from an increased sense of loss of control and an unfounded fear of perceived dangers. This means that anxiety is a reaction to an internal psychological state without the presence of clear external threats, which can deepen the individual's feelings of discomfort, apprehension, and anticipation, accompanied by physiological changes of varying intensity. Anxiety and fear are often confused because both represent an emotional state involving internal pressure and tension, accompanied by various physiological changes. Both are triggered by a perceived threat, prompting the individual to act in defense and self-preservation (Ben Hala, 2011, p. 72).

5.3. Definition of Exam Anxiety

Spielberger (1980) defines exam anxiety as "a personality trait in a specific situation, consisting of discomfort and emotional agitation, sometimes referred to as achievement anxiety. It is a type of state anxiety associated with exam situations, where these situations evoke feelings of fear and worry in the

individual when faced. If the level of anxiety increases in an individual, it can hinder their ability to perform the exam, leading to an unbalanced response" (as cited in Sayhi, 2012, p. 76).

Bagana et al. (2011) generally define exam anxiety as a set of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses accompanying anxiety about potential negative consequences depending on performance in an evaluative situation. This anxiety manifests as an inability to think or remember, feelings of tension, difficulty in reading and understanding simple sentences or instructions in the exam, and a lack of self-confidence (p. 1334).

6. Symptoms of Exam Anxiety

Students with high levels of exam anxiety generally exhibit the following symptoms:

6.1. Physiological Symptoms

The most common symptoms include tension, loss of appetite, accelerated heartbeat before and during the exam, dry throat, difficulty concentrating and focusing on answering questions, trembling and cold extremities, muscle tension, increased physical activity, frequent urination, and sometimes diarrhea (Baali et al., 2021, p. 87).

6.2 Behavioral Symptoms

These symptoms are numerous and may include a desire to attract others' attention, negativity in interactions with others, engaging in reckless behaviors, excessive smoking, impulsivity, withdrawal, and being easily negatively affected by events and adversities (Al-Ayib, 2010, p. 26).

6.3. Psychological Symptoms

Psychological symptoms appear in various forms, including distraction, difficulty in concentration and logical thinking, confusion, tension, lack of motivation, severe psychological distress before and during the exam, negative thoughts of failure, severe breathing difficulties before and during the exam, lack of focus, complaints of mental block and inability to think, disturbing dreams, nightmares, and sleep disorders (Baali et al., 2021, p. 86).

7. Types of Exam Anxiety

7.1 Facilitative Exam Anxiety

Facilitative exam anxiety refers to a moderate level of anxiety that has a positive, motivating effect. This type of anxiety drives and energizes students to prepare for exams and facilitates their performance. When anxiety levels are moderate and within reasonable bounds, its impact tends to be more facilitative. Moderate anxiety serves as a source of energy that propels students to work and perform well (Rashid, 2011, p. 142). It encourages students to study, review, and achieve high academic performance, stimulating and motivating them to prepare for exams and easing their performance during the exam (Kadouri, 2015, p. 223).

This aligns with Wine's perspective (1971-1980), who observed that individuals with high exam anxiety often divide their attention between task-related and self-related concerns. In contrast, individuals with low exam anxiety tend to focus more on task-related matters only (as cited in Sissban, 2019, p. 19).

This suggests a link between the motivation that drives a person to work and anxiety—when an individual is in a testing situation, they feel anxiety that motivates them to successfully complete their tasks (Debbar, 2019, p. 80).

7.2 Debilitative Exam Anxiety

Debilitative exam anxiety refers to high levels of anxiety that have a negative, obstructive effect. It is characterized by heightened nervousness, increased fear, and apprehension, which elicit inappropriate responses, thus hindering the student's ability to prepare for and perform during exams. High anxiety is the primary barrier to achievement or performance in various fields, particularly in exams, as it inhibits the student's ability to work and respond positively to the exam. When anxiety levels are excessively high, performance tends to deteriorate significantly (Rashid, 2011, p. 143).

Zahran (2000), like other researchers, notes that high exam anxiety has a negative, obstructive impact on academic and educational performance. It leads to nervous tension, increased fear and anxiety, and inappropriate responses, which hinder the student's ability to recall and comprehend information, causing confusion both during exam preparation and while taking the exam. Therefore, debilitative (excessive or high) exam anxiety is unnecessary and should be reduced and managed (Kadouri, 2015, p. 223).

8. Causes of Exam Anxiety

According to Zahran (2000), mental health professionals and educational specialists identify several key factors contributing to exam anxiety. These include a lack of knowledge about study topics, diminished motivation for success and achievement, and difficulties with learning, organizing, or reviewing information before and during the exam. Past experiences of failure and repeated setbacks are also significant contributors. Inadequate preparation and poor exam-taking skills further exacerbate the problem. Self-centeredness and a lack of self-confidence, along with negative attitudes towards exams from students, teachers, and parents, play a role as well. The perceived difficulty of exams and the belief that one's future hinges on these tests can heighten anxiety. Additional pressures, such as threats or the potential for failure, efforts to meet parental and teacher expectations, and competition with peers, also contribute to exam anxiety. Moreover, when exam anxiety is linked with unpleasant stimuli, such as negative social evaluations and uncomfortable physiological responses, it can become more pronounced. Learned helplessness, expectations of failure, and a sense of lacking control are further factors that increase exam anxiety (Kadouri, 2015, p. 225).

9. Procedures and Methods to Reduce Exam Anxiety

Several procedures can help students reduce exam anxiety. These methods include: following proper study techniques to master the material, ensuring adequate sleep, eating a suitable meal before the exam, maintaining a positive self-view and focusing on strengths and success factors, reviewing the material thoroughly well before the exam, starting with easier questions to build self-confidence, managing time effectively, and reading instructions and questions carefully (Abdullah Kamal, 2011, p. 5).

To manage high levels of exam anxiety, Zahran (2000) recommends reducing and preventing its escalation to avoid hindering exam preparation and performance. This can be achieved through various programs, including:

- Implementing intervention programs to develop skills for managing exam situations.
- Supporting assertive behavior that strengthens responses against anxiety in general, and exam anxiety in particular.
- Applying appropriate procedural models.
- Using direct or indirect group counseling methods.
- Employing psychodramatic techniques.

- Utilizing behavioral counseling techniques, such as systematic desensitization and progressive muscle relaxation.
- Viewing anxiety-provoking exam situations.
- Using pre-prepared exam anxiety coping training.
- Applying cognitive counseling, particularly rational-emotive counseling (Al-Sayed, 2014, p. 143).

10. Discussion

Since the mid-1950s, numerous studies and research have been conducted on exam anxiety among students at various educational levels, aiming to identify and address academic deficiencies, particularly among those with high levels of exam anxiety. Anxiety often causes students to experience tension and fear of failure, feelings of incompetence, and anticipatory punishment, sometimes even impairing their ability to complete exams, which in turn leads to poor performance (Idham, 2020, p. 499).

Many studies have concluded that exam anxiety levels are high among both schoolchildren and university students. For instance, a study by Talha, Saltani, and colleagues (2020) aimed to investigate the role of online education in reducing exam anxiety among high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that exam anxiety was high. The researchers attributed this to the pandemic disrupting students' usual study habits, such as group study sessions and in-person support classes, which were legally and health-wise restricted.

Similarly, a study by Bouatra (2020) aimed at assessing the level of exam anxiety among high school seniors found that anxiety levels were very high among the sample (p. 1). Ali Mohamed and Ghrib Al-Arabi (2023) conducted research to explore exam anxiety levels among students preparing for the baccalaureate exam and found a high level of anxiety in their sample (p. 129). These studies, while supporting the findings of high exam anxiety, also reveal that results can vary, as some studies might contradict or differ in their conclusions.

Further, research on university students who have already overcome the baccalaureate exam, such as Abdullah Kamal's study (2011), highlighted that students at higher education institutions also experience exam anxiety across various disciplines and levels. This study showed a relationship between exam anxiety and failure, indicating that elevated anxiety levels among university students could be linked

to deficiencies in mental health components like positive thinking, quality of life, psychological resilience, and logical thinking.

On the other hand, some studies contradict these findings. For example, a study by Chriq Wiza (2017) found that the level of exam anxiety among a sample of fourth-year middle school students in Boumerdes was average and acceptable (p. 191).

A review of the various studies indicates a significant agreement on the high levels of exam anxiety among students, attributed to a lack of intellectual and mental skills to face exams in a sound, logical, and positive manner. This could lead to ineffective use of students' potential during exams. Conversely, lower levels of anxiety, considered average and acceptable, may result from differing variables in each study's sample, including social, environmental, cultural, ethnic, political, and security factors. What warrants further research is the critical boundary between acceptable levels of anxiety, which is motivational and positive, and debilitating anxiety, which threatens students' education and future. For example, students with generally low anxiety may lack motivation and self-efficacy, leading to poor performance and behavioral issues due to insufficient focus and commitment to their studies.

11. Conclusion

Exam anxiety, particularly at high levels, is one of the most complex psychological issues and a leading problem faced by students across various educational stages. Its impact is most evident in secondary education, emerging from the interaction between individual personal factors and the exam situation itself. These factors combine to support cognitive components that, in turn, stimulate emotional aspects, manifesting in psychological symptoms such as low self-confidence, confusion, and heightened fear. Physiological symptoms may also appear, such as nausea, fainting, sweating, and hand tremors— all negative adaptive strategies that individuals use to avoid the exam situation.

Thus, exam anxiety encompasses two components: the first represents an internal psychological state, while the second refers to observable emotional-behavioral states. It has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, it acts as a motivator, driving individuals to achieve high levels of performance and productivity by eliciting appropriate responses to the exam situation. Conversely, the negative side hinders expected performance, impeding the individual's behavior and triggering inappropriate responses that affect academic outcomes. This necessitates providing specialized counseling

and psychological interventions to manage and address exam anxiety effectively, minimizing its impact on individual performance and achievement.

Reference

Abdullah, K. (2011). The issue of quantity and quality in the Algerian educational system: The relationship between exam anxiety and student failure. *Journal of Education and Epistemology,* 1(2), 87-111. https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/43787

Al-Ayib, K. (2010). The effect of the interaction between trait-state anxiety and self-efficacy on learning motivation among fourth-year middle school students (Master's thesis, unpublished). University of Algiers 2, Algeria.

Ali, M., & Ghrib, A. (2023). The level of exam anxiety among students preparing for the baccalaureate exam: A comparative study in light of gender and specialization variables. *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences,* 15(2), 129-142. https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/222381

Al-Sayed, N. (2014). The effect of the interaction between psychological stress and exam anxiety on achievement motivation and exam results (Doctoral dissertation, University of Algiers 2). Retrieved from the National Portal for Thesis Notifications www.dsit.cerist.dz

Baali, M., Bouskra, O., & Abdel Salam, S. (2021). Psychometric properties of the exam anxiety scale among university students. *Mafahim Journal,* 4(1), 84-95. https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/148721

Bagana, E., Raciu, A., & Lupu, L. (2011). Self-esteem, optimism, and exam anxiety among high school students. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences,* 30, 1331-1338. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.10.258

Ben Hala, M. (2011). The relationship between divorce and psychological anxiety and depression among divorced women (Master's thesis, unpublished). University of Algiers 2, Algeria.

Bouatra, F. (2020). Exam anxiety and its relation to certain variables among third-year secondary students. *Journal of Psychological and Educational Sciences*, 6(3), 242-260. https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/120108

Bouljaj, N. (2014). Success and failure perceptions in the baccalaureate exam and their relationship with exam anxiety among final-year students. *Algerian Journal of Childhood and Education,* 4(2), 113-128. https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/35372

Chriq, W. (2017). The level of exam anxiety among adolescent students: A field study in some middle schools in the Boumerdes Province. *Journal of Psychological and Educational Research,* 9(1), 191-213. https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/41074

Debbar, H. (2019). Learning strategies and their relation to exam anxiety among third-year secondary students (Doctoral dissertation, University of Algiers 2). Retrieved from the National Portal for Thesis Notifications www.dsit.cerist.dz

Hamzawi, Z. (2018). The effectiveness of Jacobson's progressive relaxation in reducing exam anxiety among female students preparing for the baccalaureate exam: A field study of four cases at Emir Abdelkader Secondary School, Mostaganem. *Journal of Psychological and Educational Studies,* 11(2), 182-198. https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/63444

Idham, I. M. (2020). Exam anxiety among middle school students. *Rafidain Arts Journal,* 1(82), 495-516. https://doi.org/10.33899/radab.2020.167045

Kadouri, K., & Oumrani Tazourt, H. (2015). The phenomenon of exam anxiety in secondary school: Its causes, theoretical treatments, and practical educational guidance procedures to reduce exam anxiety. *Journal of Human and Social Sciences,* 7(18), 221-229. https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/37359

Kidson, M., & Hornblow, A. (1982). Examination anxiety in medical students: Experiences with the visual analogue scale for anxiety. *Medical Education, 16*(5), 247-250. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2923.1982.tb01259.x

Merzaq, G., Hilali, A., Mrizik, K., El Ouardi, R., & Zarhbouch, B. (2023). Test anxiety and psychological resilience among Moroccan baccalaureate students. *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research,* 38(2), 237-248. https://doi.org/10.33824/PJPR.2023.38.2.14

Rachid, B. (2011). The effectiveness of a proposed guidance program to reduce baccalaureate exam anxiety among third-year secondary students. (Master's thesis, unpublished). University of Chlef, Algeria.

Rashdan, L. M. (1993). Perceived locus of control and its relation to psychological adjustment and exam anxiety among high school students (Master's thesis, unpublished). Jordan University, Jordan.

Sayhi, S. (2012). Revealing some handwriting characteristics among students with high levels of exam anxiety: A graphological study on third-year secondary students in Biskra in the Experimental Sciences and Philosophy and Letters streams (Doctoral dissertation, University of Biskra). Retrieved from the National Portal for Thesis Notifications www.dsit.cerist.dz

Sissban, F. Z. (2019). Exam anxiety and its relation to academic achievement: A descriptive study of first-year secondary students in Mostaganem. *Journal of Human Development,* 6(4), 9-21. https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/103845

Talha, M., Soltani, A., & Badran, D. (2020). The role of e-learning in reducing exam anxiety among baccalaureate students during the COVID-19 pandemic: A field study. *Horizons in Sciences Journal,* 5(4), 235-246. https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/126789