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Eastern Kentucky University

Does Culture Impact Academic Anxiety in University Students?

Honors Thesis

Submitted

In partial Fulfillment

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By

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Does Culture Impact Academic Anxiety in University Students?

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Abstract

University students may experience academic anxiety when attending an institution of higher education. For this study we recruited a diverse population of college students with different cultural backgrounds to investigate if specific groups are more impacted by these experiences. The purpose of this study is to determine whether cultural factors (cultural inclusion, country of origin, language) influence academic anxiety in college students. A survey was distributed to Eastern Kentucky University students. The results indicated that cultural inclusion had the greatest impact on academic anxiety. Country of origin and language did not influence academic anxiety according to results.

Keywords: Academic Anxiety, University students, Country of origin, Language, Cultural inclusion

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Literature Review

Academic Anxiety

University students are at a stage where they need to take charge of their own education. They experience independence as growing adults, but new responsibilities can lead to feeling negative emotions and stressors when attending college. This includes things such as anxiety and depression, especially when it comes to their academics. Anxiety refers to feeling worried or nervous during a situation. Anxiety can be found in school settings as many students are likely to experience it. Social anxiety is a very common form of anxiety that students experience in social interactions. Furthermore, social anxiety is often associated with academic anxiety (Hooda & Saini, 2017).

Students can experience many types of anxiety; in the present investigation we are focusing on academic anxiety. "Academic Anxiety" refers to the emotions or concerns that are related to school assignments. An example item from an academic anxiety scale is: "*I tend to put off doing school work because it stresses me.*" (Cassady et al., 2019). Hooda and Sani (2017) stated that academic anxiety is composed of different components such as: worries, emotionality, study skill deficits, and task generated interference. Academic anxiety has been associated with students' academic performance (Shakir, 2014), as students who suffer from high academic anxiety have lower academic performance. A study conducted with English as a Second Language (ESL) students reported that higher levels of academic anxiety result in lower performance (Abbasi et al., 2019). It is important to consider the level of academic anxiety students experience because it can have negative consequences for their academic life and

personal well-being. For example, the test results of someone who has test anxiety may underestimate their true potential (Levine, 2008). Students can experience concern when completing their school work (Hooda & Saini, 2017), which can have negative consequences for their mental well-being.

In addition to performance, academic anxiety can also obstruct individual achievements, as well as healthy social and psychological development (Levine, 2008). According to Levine (1998) test anxiety is found more in complex classes like mathematics. Researchers have found that stigma awareness (such as prejudice and discrimination) results in higher academic anxiety and lower intrinsic motivation (Gillen-O'Neel et al., 2011). Another factor that has been associated with academic anxiety is academic buoyancy. Buoyancy refers to students' everyday academic resilience; how well students can deal with academic challenges in their education. Collie and colleagues found that academic buoyancy plays a key role in the relationship between anxiety and learning strategies (Collie et al., 2017). With students who are more resilient being the ones who are also better able to implement effective learning strategies.

Anxiety disorders may result from environmental factors, genetic factors, medical elements, drug/alcohol abuse, etc. (Rehman, 2016). The specific environmental factor that we are going to focus for this investigation is the cultural background in which the students are immersed. The university is a new environment, so undergraduates can experience stressors and anxiety due to having to adjust to a different setting. These stressors would be larger the farther the university culture is from their own culture. The age of the individuals also influences levels of academic anxiety. The adolescent stage is very delicate because teens are going through many adjustments (physical, psychological, environmental) and anxiety disorders are often developed during this time (Last et al., 1992). In order to reduce stressors and better support college

students, it is important to determine what aspects of the students' environment are likely to influence academic anxiety.

Diverse Students

The population targeted for this study is Anglo-American, Latino/a, and international students. Overall, we are evaluating academic anxiety levels in university college students. The population will be scouted at Eastern Kentucky University through an online survey. It is essential to investigate each of these populations and to compare them. The international student population is rising again in the United States. The covid pandemic limited and took the opportunity away for many students to study abroad. Now that things are returning to normal, students are again taking advantage of the opportunity to experience schooling abroad. We must consider our interactions with international students attending western schools, since many of these students' main language may not be english (e.g., Spanish, Chinese, German, etc.).

In addition to language, cultural background can impact students differently. A study conducted with Chinese and other international students found that the variables: "how important learning success is to your family" (the expectations certain families have about learning and the pressure they put in students to do well), "proficiency in English" (how well they are able to write in English), and "compatriots" (whether they have social ties with other students similar to them) were essential in forecasting academic performance (Gang Li et al., 2010). We need to determine whether these populations' needs are being met in our schools and, if not, we need to develop support and resources to assist them when necessary.

The Latino population has also risen in the past year in the United States. The 2021 Census estimates that there are around 62 million of people who identify as Hispanic/Latino (Jones et al., 2021). Latinos encounter anxiety more often than other ethnic races in the United

States (Martinez et al., 2012). These populations may be at more risk of mental health disorders than the average American student. According to McLaughlin and colleagues, the Hispanic youth (especially female) reported higher levels of global anxiety symptoms (McLaughlin et al., 2007). A research study found that Latin American students had much higher levels of psychological distress compared to Asian students (Wilton & Constantine, 2003). This could be due to different cultural values and beliefs. This supports research that points to the idea that the Latino population might more affected by academic anxiety than other populations (Martinez et al., 2012). International/Latino students may experience different obstacles than regular Anglo-American students, such as language barriers and cultural difference from their home country.

Cultural Inclusion

International students or students immigrating to the United States may experience a culture shock. Especially when they are trying to adjust to a new culture and environment. Wilton and Constantine found that the longer the Asian/Latino population have lived in the U.S. the less psychological distress they experience (Wilton & Constantine, 2003). This may be due to adaptation, similarly the longer students are in their college environment the better they are able to adjust to the new norms. A study on Native American students and their persistence in college found a positive effect when these students received social support in their university and interact with welcoming staff (Jackson et al., 2003). Having multicultural offices, student groups, and engaging professors, helps students feel more comfortable and supported. Another study conducted with this population of students suggested that it is important in college for students to have faculty and peer support (Hoover & Jacobs, 1992). Given these results, it is logical to assume that students who experience higher levels of cultural inclusion will have higher levels of well-being and reduced levels of academic anxiety.

Country of Origin

A cross cultural study investigated the effect on anxiety of the variables of country of origin, gender, and age. The results showed that there were no differences in trait and state anxiety except for Korean women (Abbassi & Stacks, 2007); overall differences did not emerge. Having said that, other research has shown that culture can play a role in how students are affected by anxiety. Researchers noted that Latino students in the USA from different countries of origin expressed anxiety through different symptoms (Varela & Hensley-Maloney, 2009). An example of somatic anxiety was an Asian American student who would experience stomach problems before school; this was due to the anxiety he was feeling but it emerged as a physical symptom (Harmon et al., 2006). In another Varela study done with children, the researchers concluded that the Latino Cultural orientation does not deal with negative feeling so these feelings are more likely to end up as internalized anxiety (Varela et al., 2019). For some of these populations it not normal to talk about feelings like sadness or stress, so these emotions end up becoming internalized. A study conducted on social anxiety disorder looked into a culture specific expression called Taijin kyofusho; a disorder similar to social anxiety but that focuses more on not embarrassing another person rather than themselves. This was found to be higher in Asian cultures than western cultures (Hofmann et al., 2010), probably due to their higher emphasis on the collective. Asian cultures may show lower rates of regular social anxiety, but they may show anxiety in a different form due to the specifics of their culture.

Each culture can have a variety of expectations when it comes to education. Some may be stricter or more rigorous than others. So, it is important to acknowledge that the academic expectations for each individual may differ. For some people failure can inhibit one's ability to continue learning (Levine, 2008). It seems that there is a correlation between expectations and

performance that may expand from expectations within one's culture. Academic expectations can become quite overwhelming for students (Levine, 2008). For example, Asian culture can have different academic values (Collie et al., 2017); Confucian Asian students are known for their high academic performance but are also exposed to higher levels of anxiety and self-doubt compared to other international students (Stankov, 2010). A study exploring the motivational profiles of Asian and Anglo-students found that the Asian students had a stronger sense of purpose for schooling than their peers (McInerney, 2006). How students value a future goal while getting education is an important factor that can influence anxiety and performance. The Asian population is known for being high achievers and this sense of purpose seems to play a big role in their academics. Another thing to consider is how the education system can differ from one country to another, so international students are likely to have different learning strategies. Young did a case study with international students and placed them in focus groups with instructors (Young, 2011), when the instructors became more aware of cultural/learning differences they were able to help this population adjust better to the American learning environment.

The concept of individualism is more relevant in western countries and collectivism is normally found in eastern countries. Individualism versus collectivism can cause many culture conflicts in students' environments. In addition, traditional values have been associated with more anxiety in Latino/Hispanic teenagers (McLaughlin et al., 2007). For example, in their study they mentioned that the concept of family should be their priority and traditional gender roles. Xie noticed that collective self-esteem was more associated with Chinese students than with the Caucasian population (Xie et al., 2008). The Chinese society is more collectivistic which can mean students are more interdependent and identified as a group more. Culture has been found to

influence the personality of the individual due to factors such as collectivism, self-concept, self-esteem, etc. (Benet-Martínez & Oishi, 2006)

Students' Language(s)

An important aspect of culture is language, which is also a relevant part of an individual's identity. Some students may have a different native tongue than English. Such as Latino/a bilingual students who consider English as their second language . We must acknowledge that students can have different levels of proficiency in their known languages. A study focused on ESL found that depending on the environment there can be different types of English language anxiety (Pappamihiel, 2002). Some students may experience anxiety when speaking English as a second/foreign language. This anxiety can correlate with the anxiety experienced inside and outside of class but can also be different (Woodrow, 2006). Researchers have stated that the limited English proficiency of international students can be a reason why they do not participate in classroom activities (Yuerong et al., 2017). Students with low English proficiency may be more challenged in American universities compared to their English speaker peers.

The Present Study

The goal of this research project is to investigate whether cultural factors have an impact on academic anxiety. The three factors measured are cultural inclusion, country of origin, and language. We decided to investigate these factors because we investigated linguistic background characteristics in a prior study (Marroquin & Incera, 2022)and, while we did not find any direct correlation between linguistic background and academic anxiety, some trends in the data led us to explore cultural aspects as possible alternative explanations. A student's cultural background may bring stressors (such as school assignments, exams, and anything related to school) that can affect their education.

Predictions

We propose three research predictions:

Hypothesis 1: Those with lower levels of cultural inclusion will have higher levels of academic anxiety.

Hypothesis 2: Those from a country other than the USA will have higher levels of academic anxiety.

Hypothesis 3: Those with a language other than English will have higher levels of academic anxiety.

Methods

Participants will respond to a survey created through Qualtrics. This questionnaire comprises three sections: cultural inclusion, country of origin, and language. We will ask participants about the language they know and where their country of origin is. As for cultural inclusion, we will use the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment Scale (CECE) (Museus et al., 2016). This scale measures factors such as belonging, cultural relevance, and connectedness in school (Museus et al., 2016). This scale has been reported to be valid and reliable. An example item from the CECE scale is *“People on campus value people's experiences in my cultural community”* (Museus et al., 2016). It is vital that students who attend university feel comfortable and included in their schools. The dependent variable in this project is academic anxiety. To measure academic anxiety, we will use a validated scale in that the student response to items on a range from 1 (Not at all typically) to 4 (Very typical of me). An example item from the academic

anxiety scale is: "*I tend to put off doing school work because it stresses me.*" (Cassady et al., 2019).

Participants

Participants (n = 200) were students recruited at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU). EKU is a predominantly white campus but has some diversity. International and Latino populations were targeted in an effort to obtain a sample as culturally diverse as possible. Participants were invited to complete an online survey. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics, and data collection was anonymous. Only participants who responded "Yes" to "*Are you an undergraduate student?*" and "Yes" to "*Being 18 years or older*" were included in the sample. There were 163 females, 29 males, 4 nonbinary and 4 others who completed the survey. Students who completed the survey through SONA (the research credit system at EKU) received research participation credit for completing the survey.

Measures

The *cultural inclusion* (CECE) scale measures the cultural inclusion of the students on scale from 1 - Strongly Disagree to 5 - Strongly Agree. It includes 13 questions regarding cultural values, connectedness, supported. The mean average is calculated to determine cultural inclusion on campus.

There are two questions about *country of origin*, one that measures the participant's own country of origin as well as their family's country of origin. There is a list of different countries so they can select the one they want, and also an option to fill in the blank if their country does not appear on the list.

There are two *language* questions that measure the language that the student is most experience/fluent in. The second question ask about their family language, as some participants might not consider themselves as fluent, but they might still be exposed to a certain language at home. There is a list of different language so they can select the one they want, and also an option to fill in the blank if their country does not appear on the list.

The *Academic Anxiety Scale* (Cassady et al, 2019) measures academic anxiety on a scale form 1 (Not at all typical of me) to 4 (Very typical of me). It includes 11 items that ask students about their work worries, stress, having a hard time and other related questions. The mean average is calculated to report the overall levels of academic anxiety that student experience on campus.

Results

Hypothesis 1

We performed a regression analysis to determine whether those with higher levels of cultural inclusion have lower levels on academic anxiety (see Figure 1). In line with Hypothesis 1, there was a significant negative correlation, those with higher levels of cultural inclusion had lower levels of academic anxiety ($r = - 0.21, p = .003$).

Hypothesis 2

We performed a one-way ANOVA to determine whether those from a country of origin other than the USA have higher levels of academic anxiety (see Figures 2 & 3). Against Hypothesis 2, country of origin did not impact academic anxiety ($F = 0.71, p = .491$). Figure 2 shows the data with all of the countries reported: China (2), Mexico (7), Saudi Arabia (1), United

Kingdom (1), Vietnam (1), Colombia (1), Panama (2), Taiwan (1), United States (176), Cuba (1), Philippines (1), Arab Emirates (1), and Venezuela (1). However, in order to perform the one-way ANOVA is more appropriate to aggregate these countries so each level of the ANOVA has at least 5 participants. Figure 3 combines these countries in regions: Latin America (12), United States (176) and Other (8). As reported above, the region of origin of the student did not influence academic anxiety.

Hypothesis 3

We performed a one-way ANOVA to determine whether those who speak a language other than English have higher levels of academic anxiety (see Figure 4 & 5). Against Hypothesis 3, the language of the student did not influence academic anxiety ($F = 1.94, p = 0.106$). Figure 4 included all the students' languages reported in the questionnaire: American Sign Language (11), French (4), Mandarin (1), Tagalog (2), Arabic (2), German (3), Vietnamese (1), Creole (1), Korean (1), Spanish (49) and English (120). To be able to perform the one-way ANOVA, in Figure 5 we combined these languages into five categories: American Sign Language (11), European (7), English (120), Spanish (45), and Other (8). As reported above, the language of the student did not influence academic anxiety. However, two interesting trends emerged in Figure 5. First, the students with European languages (French, German, Italian) had lower levels of academic anxiety. While this group was small ($n = 7$), this trend could be a real effect that should be explored with a larger sample. Second, the students who spoke Spanish had a bimodal distribution. Half of the students had higher than normal levels of academic anxiety, while the other half had lower than normal levels of academic anxiety.

Discussion

In summary, the main result of this study is that cultural inclusion has a big impact on academic anxiety. Those who feel more included are less academically anxious. Surprisingly, country of origin and language had no effect on academic anxiety. It seems that perceived cultural inclusion had a bigger effect than the actual culture itself on academic anxiety. It is not that students with a specific cultural background have higher levels of academic anxiety; instead, those that perceive their culture to be accepted at the university are less academically anxious.

The sample included a large population of Latino students. In Figure 5 it is possible to see a split of the Latino/Spanish speaking population, in that half of them have higher than average and half of them have lower than average academic anxiety. It is interesting to consider what could be causing this difference within this population. The Latino population is not an homogeneous group, instead, two subgroups seems to emerge in the data. Parental expectations and pressure from this specific culture may play a role in these students' level of academic anxiety. The students who have high academic anxiety could be experiencing more pressure from their family when it comes to their education.

A limitation of this study is that the majority of the sample population were people from the United States who only knew English. Despite our best efforts to recruit a diverse sample, Eastern Kentucky University is a very homogeneous campus with not as much cultural and linguistic diversity as other institutions. The sample might have not been diverse enough to detect a difference among cultures. For example, we only had four people who identified as international students. So, we could not see if being an international student had an effect on academic anxiety. Future studies could be completed in more diverse campuses where it might

be easier to gather data from diverse students and measure whether their cultural background influences academic anxiety.

It is crucial to further investigate the relationship between university students' perceived cultural inclusion and their academic anxiety. In particular, international or Latino populations may be more vulnerable to academic anxiety than the general population if they do not feel included within their universities. It is important to investigate the perceived inclusion of difference ethnic/racial groups as they may be at higher risk of underperforming in college. There is much research conducted on how general anxiety and other factors influence college students. We need to conduct research on how these factors impact these minority populations. We must investigate areas such as culture because it can influence how a student does in school, especially if they do not feel included in their school. Having a different culture may make them feel left out and depressed, so we need to explore if there is a problem where students are not feeling included.

Our results support the idea that cultural inclusion is important to students because they want to feel supported and included in their university. Universities need to have resources available and make changes to help support all university students. It should be part of all educational systems to make students feel welcome and supported regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, etc. Regarding cultural inclusion, there are multiple interventions that could help students feel included (e.g., having diversity workshops or language inclusive activities). Students' organizations and events can help students feel at ease and welcome at their university.

Anxiety can become harmful if students are experiencing an overwhelming amount. We need to be on the lookout for these students' mental health. We need resources and support for students suffering from high academic anxiety. Another implication of this study is that

universities need to implement programs to help students with academic anxiety. Academic management skills can be helpful to students if they are taught before schooling start (Rehman, 2016). This way students can attend workshops that help prepare them for college by learning skills and techniques that can prevent or reduce anxiety. For example, universities should let students know as soon as possible about the support groups or counseling services that are available on campus. An important point Rehem (2016) states is that professors and staff members should acknowledge what anxiety symptoms look like (Rehman, 2016). This way the professors can help direct the students to support systems that will provide the best solutions. We need to create awareness for everyone on campus to aid in preventing academic anxiety and all other anxiety disorders. With more awareness universities can have positive interventions for these populations. Olivas and Li stated that mentoring or academic help can be better targeted toward this international population (Olivas & Li, 2006).

Future research can investigate academic performance of university students and how academic anxiety relates to academic performance. Interestingly, we performed an exploratory analysis (see Figure 6) on whether cultural inclusion influences GPA and we did not find a significant correlation ($r = 0.02$, $p = .780$). It is possible that the emotional aspects of academic anxiety are influenced by different variables than the cognitive aspects of academic performance. Future studies should investigate whether different factors influence these different cognitive and affective variables.

Overall, the biggest factor influencing academic anxiety was cultural inclusion. Thus, cultural inclusion is an important variable to consider in university settings. The more the students feel included the less academic anxiety they will experience. For students to thrive in college they need to feel included and have low levels of anxiety.

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Appendix

Figure 1

Relationship between Cultural Inclusion and Academic Anxiety.

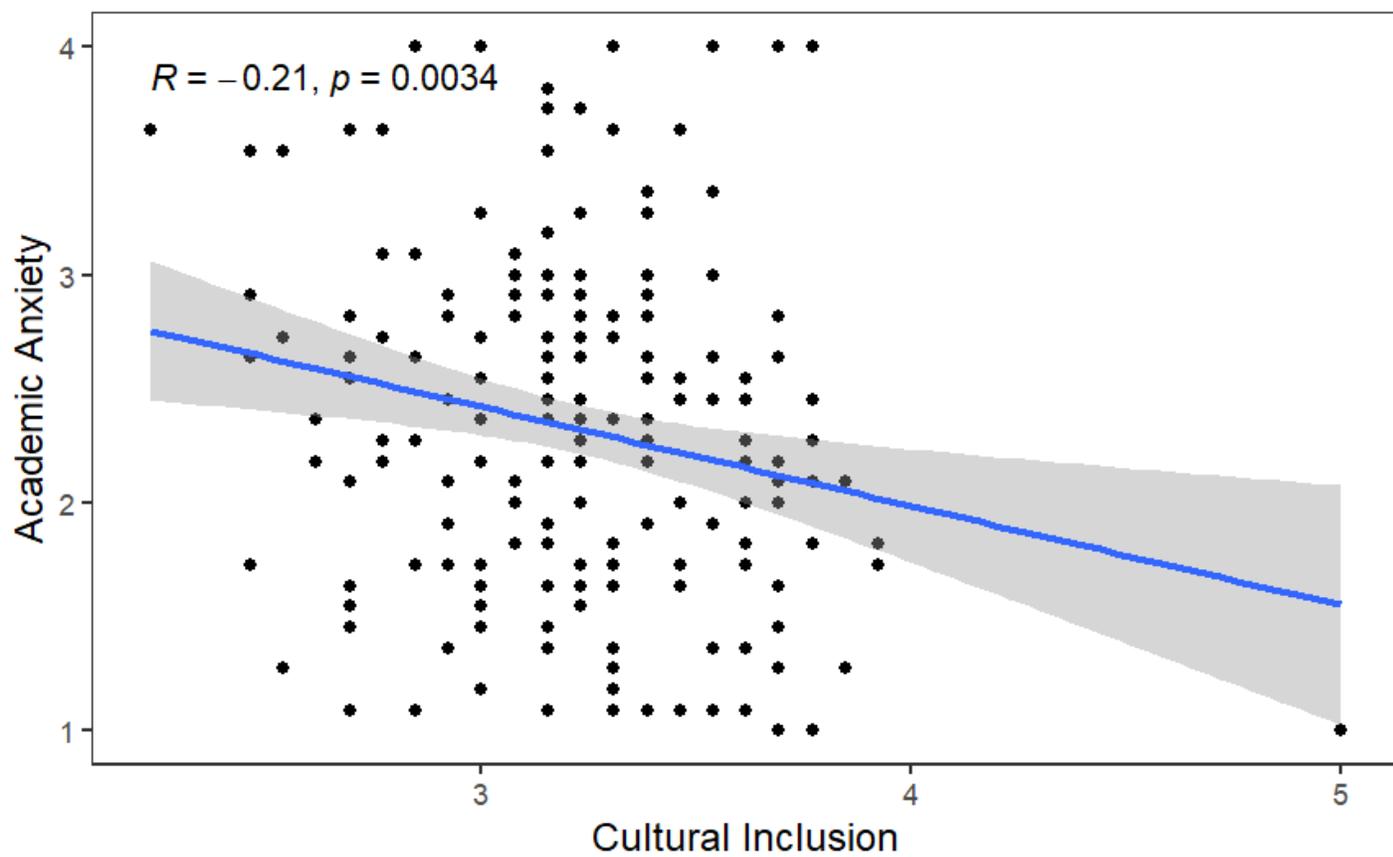


Figure 2

Relationship between country of origin and Academic Anxiety.

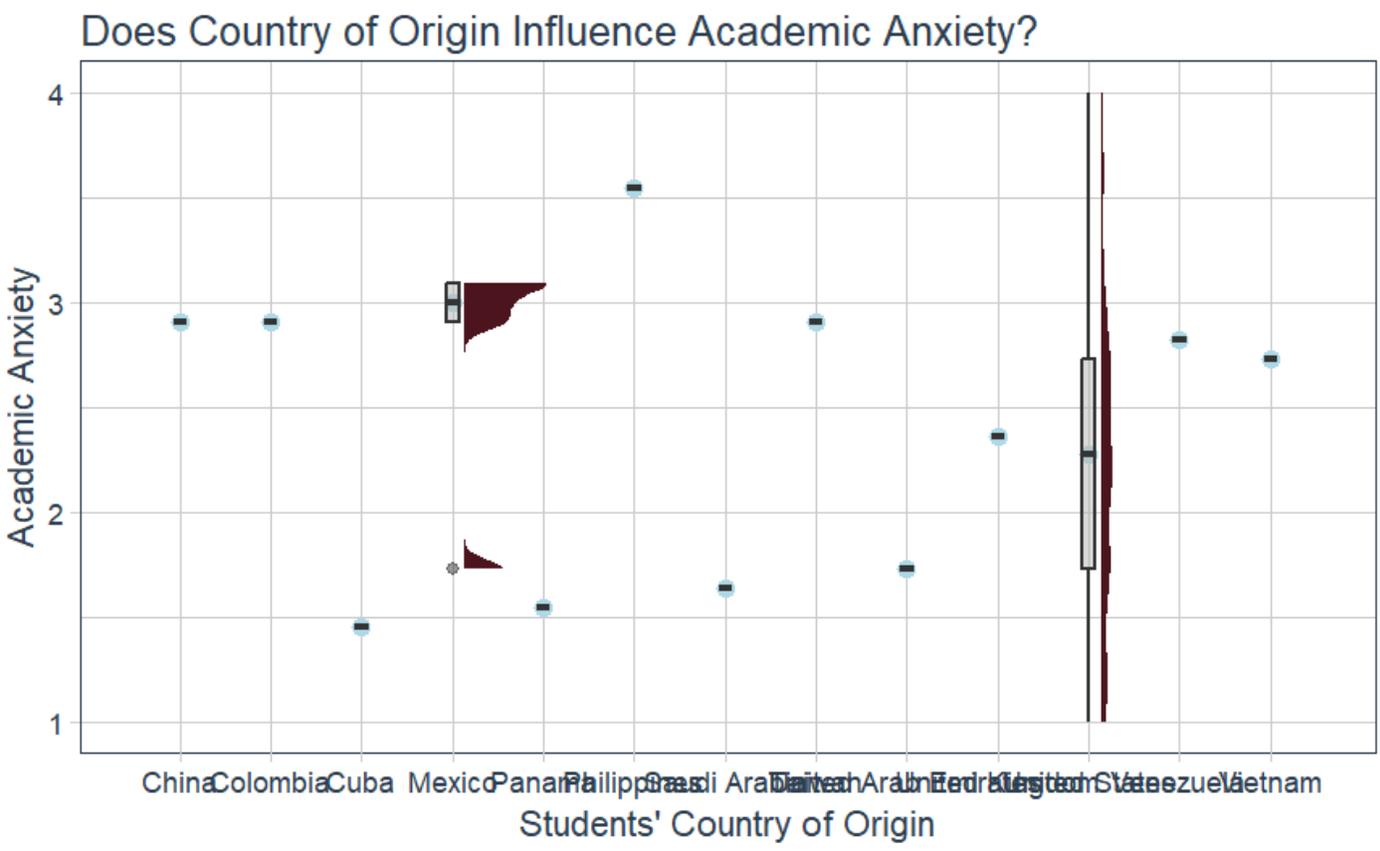


Figure 3

Relationship between Region of Origin and Academic Anxiety.

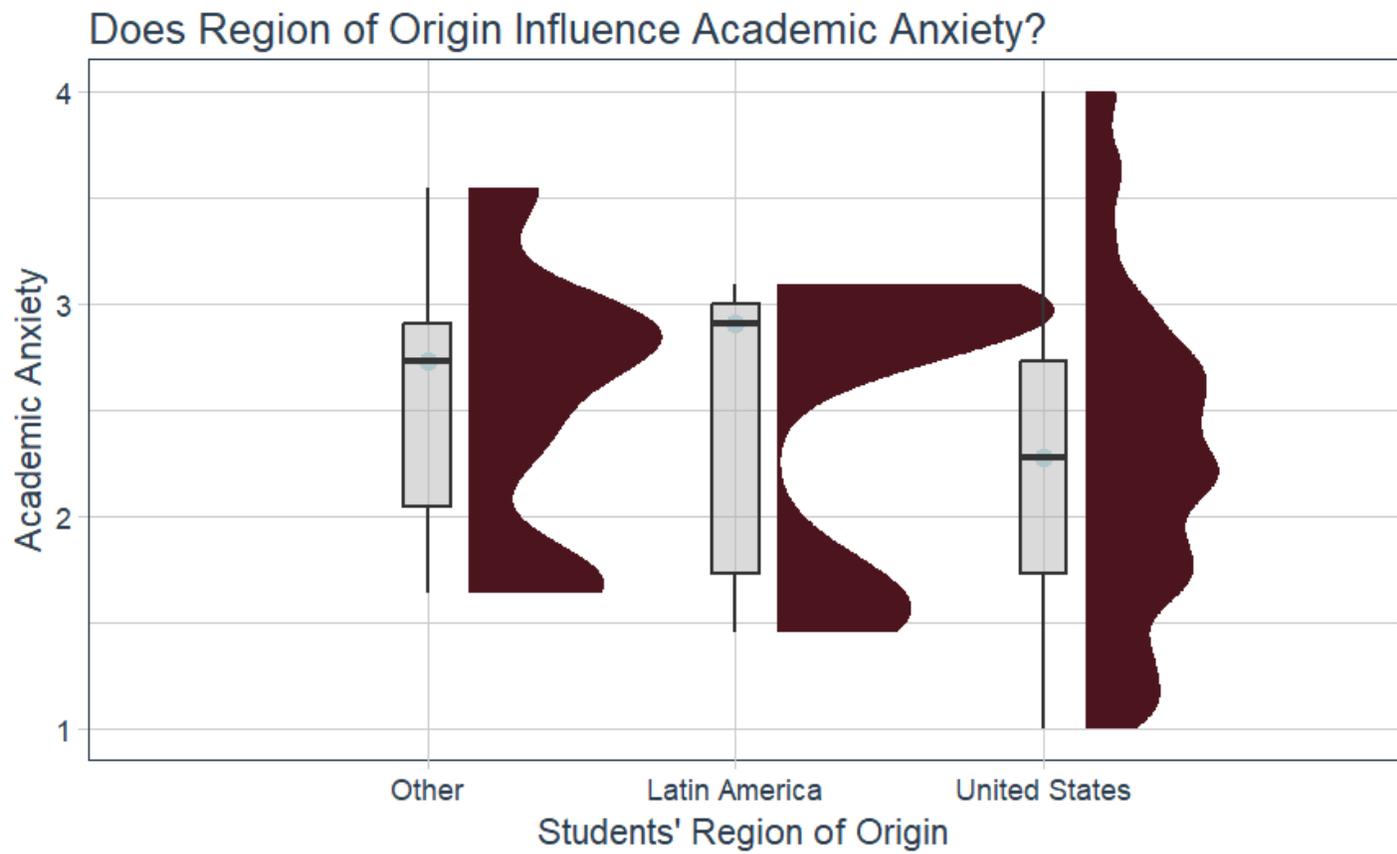


Figure 4

Relationship between Language and Academic Anxiety.

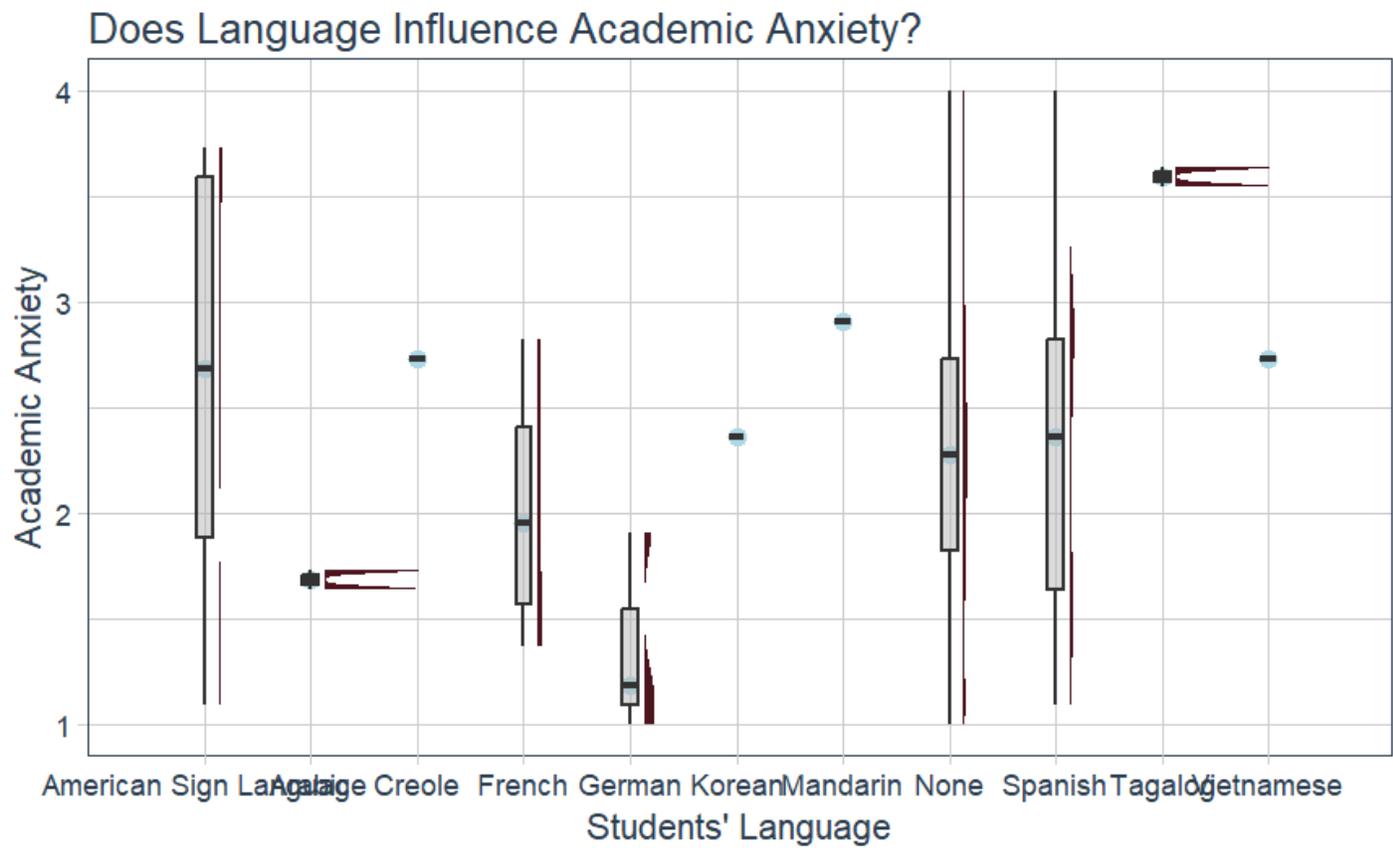


Figure 5.

Relationship between Student Language (Version 2) and Academic Anxiety.

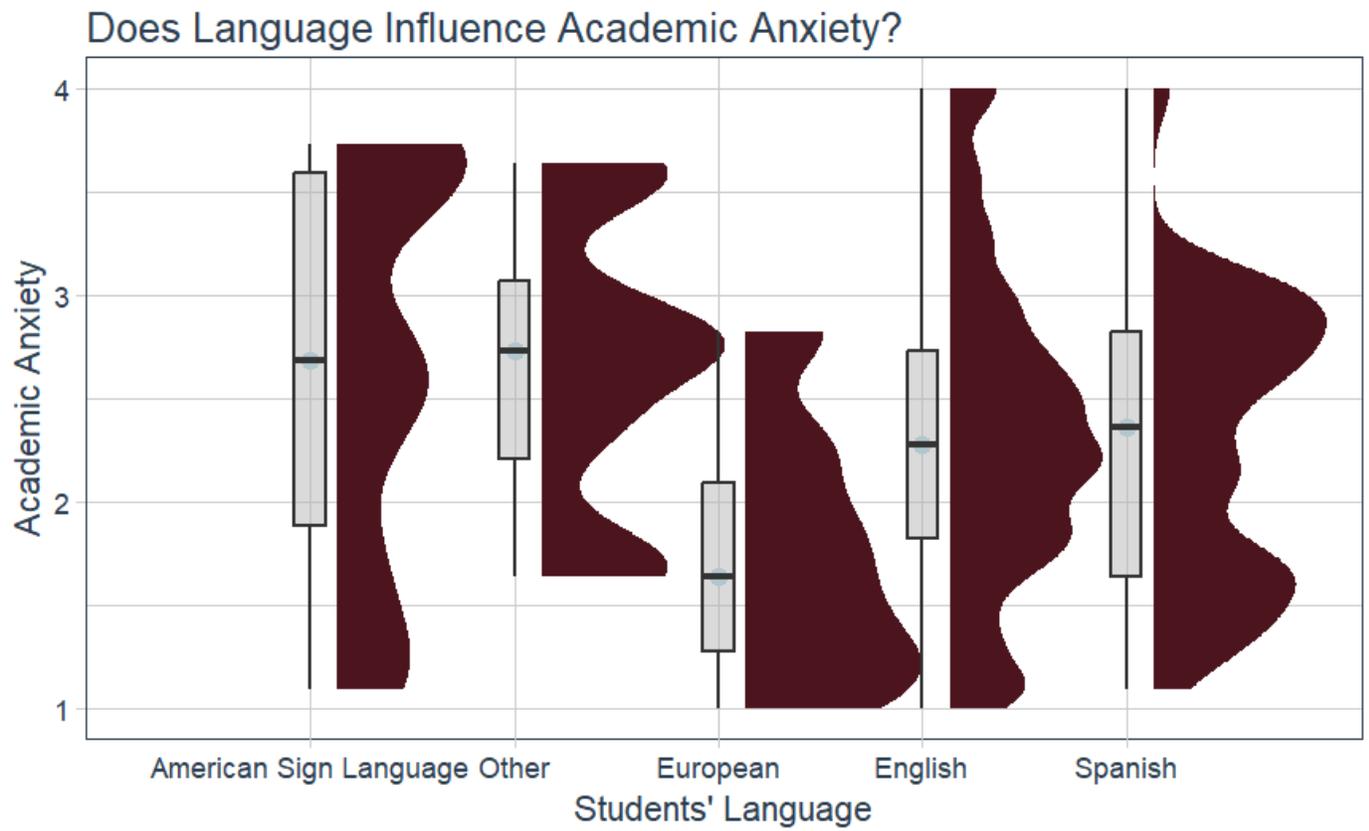
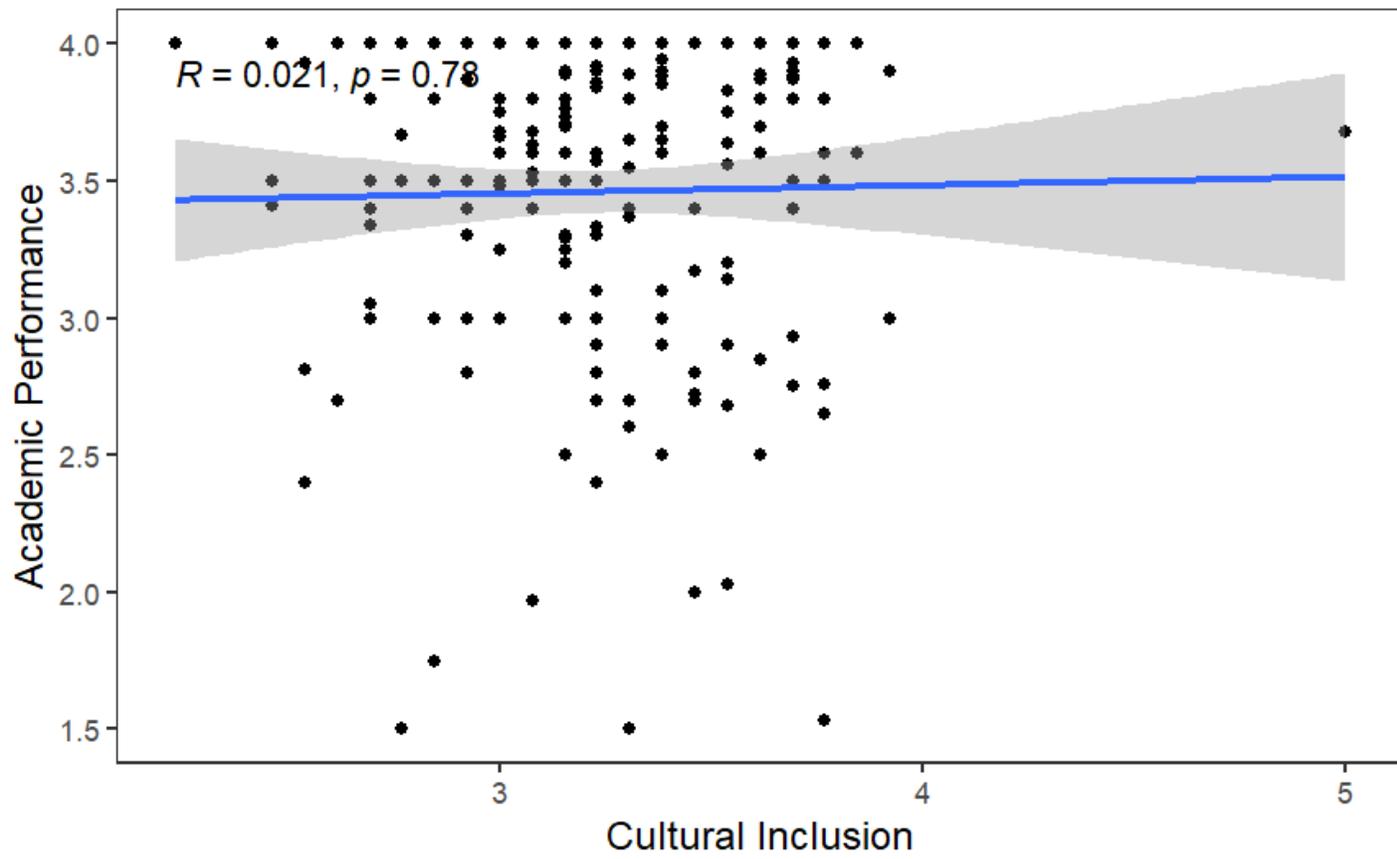


Figure 6

Relationship between Cultural Inclusion and Academic Performance (GPA).



Questionnaire Used



How Does Culture Impact Academic Anxiety in University Students?

Hello!

My name is Angie Marroquin, and I am a Psychology/Spanish undergraduate student completing my Honors Thesis at ECU.

In this study, you will be asked to respond to questions regarding culture and academic anxiety. It should take less than 15 minutes of your time. To participate, you must be 18 years old or older and must be a college/university student.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to answer any question or to withdraw your participation at any point during the study without penalty. Your responses will be anonymous and no identifying information will be collected from you.

If you are an ECU student participating through the SONA system, you will receive 0.5 SONA credits. If you have questions or would like to further discuss the study, you may contact me at angie_marroquin1@mymail.eku.edu.

Thank you for your participation!

Angie Marroquin

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Are you an Undergraduate student? Yes / No

What is your age? ___ years old

Are you an international student? Yes/ No

What is your gender? Male/Female/Nonbinary/Trans/Other

What is your gpa? ___

LANGUAGE, COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, AND CULTURAL INCLUSION

What language other than English do **you** know? (If you speak more than 1 language, please select the **one** you are more experienced/fluent in.)

American Sign Language/ Arabic/ French/ German/ Hindi/ Italian/ Japanese/ Mandarin/ Persian/ Portuguese/ Spanish/ Telugu/Vietnamese/ Other___

What language other than English does **your family** know? (If they speak more than 1 language, please select the **one** they are more experienced/fluent in.)

American Sign Language/ Arabic/ French/ German/ Hindi/ Italian/ Japanese/ Mandarin/ Persian/ Portuguese/ Spanish/ Telugu/Vietnamese/ Other___

What is **your country** of origin?

Afghanistan/Argentina/Austria/Belgium/Bolivia/Brazil/Costa Rica/Cuba/China/France/Germany/Guatemala/Honduras/India/Indonesia/Iraq/Italy/Japan/Mexico/Netherlands/Norway/Peru/Philippines/Poland/Saudi Arabia/South Korea/ Switzerland/Taiwan/Thailand/ Turkey/ United Kingdom/ Vietnam/Other/ United States

What is **your family's** country of origin?

Afghanistan/Argentina/Austria/Belgium/Bolivia/Brazil/Costa Rica/Cuba/China/France/Germany/Guatemala/Honduras/India/Indonesia/Iraq/Italy/Japan/Mexico/Netherlands/Norway/Peru/Philippines/Poland/Saudi Arabia/South Korea/ Switzerland/Taiwan/Thailand/ Turkey/ United Kingdom/ Vietnam/Other/ United States

CULTURAL INCLUSION SCALE

Rating on a scale 1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Somewhat Disagree

3 =Neither Agree Nor Disagree 4 =Somewhat Agree 5=Strongly Agree

It is easy to find people on campus with similar backgrounds as me.

It is easy to find people on campus with similar backgrounds as me.

I interact with people from similar backgrounds as me frequently on campus.

There is sufficient space for me to connect with people from my community.

People on campus value the cultural knowledge that I possess.

My culture is valued on campus.

People on campus do NOT value my cultural community.

People on campus value the experiences of people in my cultural community.

People on campus do NOT value the knowledge possessed by people in my cultural community.

There are enough opportunities to have meaningful interactions with people from other cultural backgrounds.

There are NOT enough opportunities to discuss important issues with people from different cultural backgrounds.

There are enough opportunities to discuss important social issues with people from different cultural backgrounds.

There are enough opportunities to have meaningful discussions about racial and ethnic issues.

There is NOT a supportive environment for having meaningful discussions about important social issues across cultural groups

ACADEMIC ANXIETY SCALE

Rating on a scale of 1-4

1 = Not at all typical of me 2 = Somewhat typical of me

3 = Quite typical of me 4 = Very typical of me

I often worry that my best is not as good as expected in school. ___

I tend to put off doing schoolwork because it stresses me. __

I often worry that I am not doing assignments properly. __

I am less confident about school than my classmates. __

I have a sense of dread when I am in my classroom. __

I tend to find my instructors intimidating. __

I spend much of my time at school worrying about what is next. __

There is something about school that scares me. __

I'm concerned about what my classmates think about my abilities. __

I often feel sick when I need to work on a major class assignment __

I have a hard time handling school responsibilities. __

If you have any additional feedback/comments/suggestions, please type them here ____