
Intimate Fear among College Students: Concepts, Measurements, Consequences, and Antecedent Variables

ABSTRACT Background: Intimate relationships have a significant impact on college students, and the fear of intimacy seriously hinders the establishing and developing intimate relationships. **Objective:** To understand the research progress on the fear of intimacy among college students and provide reference suggestions for developing corresponding intervention measures. **Methods:** Literature search was used to search for Chinese or English literature in CNKI, Google Scholar, and PubMed using the keyword "college students+ fear of intimacy". **Results:** Thirty-four papers were included. The fear of intimacy is an important predictor variable for the mental health of college students, negatively predicting their interpersonal relationship quality and subjective well-being, and positively predicting depression and anxiety. The development fear of intimacy is constrained by various factors such as individual demographics, early experiences, current romantic experiences, and psychological quality. **Conclusion:** Previous studies have provided useful reference opinions for understanding the mechanisms of intimate relationship related issues among college students and providing effective interventions, with good theoretical and practical value. However, research methods need to be improved.

Keywords: College students; fear of intimacy; mental health

1. Introduction

Human beings are social animals with a natural need to establish relationships with others. Among many relationships, intimate relationships are considered one of the most important interpersonal relationships for humans. Eric Klinenberg et al. [1] believe that participating in positive social interactions and establishing and maintaining intimate relationships are fundamental human needs. Intimate relationships play an undeniable role in individual physical and mental development, and individuals tend to explore the similarities and differences in their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors when establishing intimate relationships with others [2]. The Psychological Development Theory proposed by Erickson [3] suggests that individuals have a urgent need to establish intimate relationships in early adulthood, and college students are a typical group at this psychological development stage. Therefore, they have a strong pursuit of intimate relationships, and the establishment of intimate relationships also plays a significant role in promoting the physical and mental growth of college students. But in real life, we have found that many young people do not seek intimate relationships with a positive attitude. According to statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2020 [4], the number of registered marriages in China decreased by 12.2% year-on-year, reaching a new low since the continuous decline in 2013. Fear of love and marriage has gradually become a norm for many young people, and the "celibacy" view of marriage and love has frequently received public attention and discussion. The internet buzzwords "stubborn singlehood" and "suicidal singlehood" are very popular. More and more young people are both eager to have beautiful intimate relationships and fearful of various problems that may arise in intimate relationships. Being single is not a bad thing, but being afraid

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to enter love and marriage due to fear may not necessarily be a good state. Another survey report on adult socialization in the United States shows that approximately 17% of adults are afraid to establish overly intimate relationships, with a high proportion among college students [5]. This kind of fear of expressing emotions is the fear of intimacy. Research has shown that fear of intimacy is an important factor in individuals' ability to establish and maintain intimate relationships, as well as a risk factor for emotional problems.

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2. Overview of fear of intimacy

2.1 Concepts

2.1.1 Intimate relationships

Kiecheler et al. [6] believe that the characteristics of intimate relationships are mainly reflected in the following 3 points: First, the social distance between partners is very small and involves the "personal privacy zone" of both parties. Second, partners can not only express their thoughts through language, but also understand each other through intuition. Final, the relationship between partners should be interdependent, and their behavior creates a strong sense of mutual dependence. There is a common desire between partners to be together forever or at least for a long time, with a high degree of intimacy, and both parties will not easily replace each other with others. It is precisely this difference between intimate relationships and other interpersonal relationships that makes establishing and maintaining satisfactory intimate relationships more challenging.

Intimate relationships include physical, psychological, and emotional relationships, covering emotional, physical, sexual, and intellectual intimacy, which is necessary for physical and psychological health [6]. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory [7], the pursuit of intimate relationships can satisfy our needs for safety, belonging, and love. Social psychologists unanimously agree that actively participating in social interactions, establishing and maintaining good intimate relationships, is an indispensable part of an individual's healthy life. The satisfaction of intimate needs is related to a series of positive benefits, while the lack of intimate relationships can cause a series of physiological and psychological problems for individuals [6].

2.1.2 Fear of intimacy

Fear usually refers to a repressed experience caused by an individual's sense of powerlessness [7]. Since the 1990s, Researchers have begun to pay attention to the study of intimacy fear. Fear of intimacy first appeared in an article by Descutner et al. [8] on the development of Fear of Intimate Scale (FIS), where they defined fear of intimacy as the inhibition that occurs when a person communicates important thoughts and feelings to important others (i.e., the inability to express them freely). This inhibition may be caused by anxiety or other reasons, and here 'important others' refer to important others in any relationship. This definition includes three elements: (1) content, which refers to the communication of personal information. (2) Emotional validity, which refers to the strong emotional experience of the parties involved in the communication; (3) Vulnerability arises from a high regard for intimate partners and a fear of being hurt. This psychological characteristic is very stable and will exist regardless of whether you are in an intimate relationship or who your intimate partner is. This is different from social anxiety, which refers to the anxiety that arises from interacting with different people in different situations, without any important emotional communication for the individual. For example, when a person confides their sadness to a stranger in a park or train, this communication has both substantive and

emotional content. However, the stranger is not an important person to the individual, and the person who engage in self-exposure do not have the risk of being harmed. Therefore, this situation lacks vulnerability and cannot be considered an intimate interaction, nor does it involve fear of intimacy.

A large number of empirical studies support this viewpoint [1, 9, 10]. Sobral et al. [11] extended this concept by stating that fear of intimacy has two parts: the first part is the fear of losing the other person, and the second part is the fear of losing oneself. The former refers to the fear of others leaving and abandoning oneself if one exposes their shortcomings and important privacy. The latter refers to an individual's inherent fear that important others may invade their personal space.

2.2 The development process of individual intimacy fear

The establishment of intimate relationships begins in a person's childhood. Freud's theory of personality development stages [7] states that the anal period is the first critical period for individuals to learn how to receive love, praise, and appreciation, and establish intimate relationships. If this period is not treated appropriately, the person's personality will remain marked by fear, guilt, and contempt. From this perspective, if an individual during this period does not receive love and praise, but instead frequently receives criticism and negative self-evaluation and self-deprecation reactions, they will feel ashamed and directed hostility towards themselves. However, because shame involves a real or imagined rejection and disapproval of others, hostility can turn towards rejecting others as retaliation, leading to avoidance of relationships and the development of intimacy fear [12]. A common response to shame is a tendency to withdraw from social interaction, including emotional or oral expression [12]. Therefore, individuals who experience shame may experience social withdrawal, reduced emotional expression, and decreased emotional expression tendencies, resulting in the development of affective disorders. On the other hand, individuals still have the ability to maintain their own healthy and orderly development in the face of adversity - psychological resilience [1], which can help individuals resist shame, develop their ability to express emotions, and avoid the fear of intimacy.

According to Erikson's theory of personality development stages [7], the age range of 18-25 is another critical period for individuals to seek and establish intimate relationships. During this period, the main task of individuals is to establish intimate relationships, experience the realization of love, and avoid sense of loneliness. But only by establishing a sense of self-identity during adolescence (12-18 years old) can good intimate relationships be developed in early adulthood (18-25 years old), otherwise loneliness will arise, because the establishment of intimate relationships essentially involves merging self-identity with the identity of others.

3. The hindrance of intimacy fear to individuals

Firstly, the fear of intimacy is not conducive to the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships, especially intimate relationships. It leads individuals to avoid interpersonal relationships and have lower interpersonal satisfaction. Their interpersonal relationships are often short-lived, unstable, with lower intimacy, and less trust and commitment [13]. Secondly, the fear of intimacy reduces an individual's overall mental health level. Good interpersonal relationships are protective factors for mental health, and the fear of intimacy hinders the deep development of interpersonal relationships, which in turn is detrimental to the mental health. The fear of intimacy positively predicts depression and anxiety, and negatively

predicts happiness [14]. Thirdly, the fear of intimacy reduces an individual's sense of social support, because it hinders individuals from engaging in deep emotional communication with others, making it difficult for them to receive effective social support. They tend to deal with difficulties on their own and try to avoid or minimize seeking help [15-16]. Daniel et al [17] further pointed out that intimacy fear increases the risk of developing depression by reducing individuals' subjective social support.

4. The structure and measurement of the fear of intimacy

There is not much research on measuring the fear of intimacy, and most studies use the Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) developed by Descutner and Thelen (1991) [8]. This scale does not require participants to be in an intimate relationship (romantic relationship), but mainly evaluates the individuals' difficulty in expressing their emotions and anxiety level when facing intimate relationships. FIS is a single dimension and uses Likert 5-point scoring. This scale has 35 questions, including 15 reverse scoring questions. The first 30 questions require individuals to assume they are in a relationship, while the last 5 questions require individuals to recall past interpersonal relationships. Subsequently, Ingersoll et al. (2008) [18] proposed a three factor model for FIS, including Imagined Openness, Imagined Fear of Closeness, and Past Fear of Closeness. However, most scholars believe that the one-dimensional structure is more suitable.

5. Factors influencing intimacy fear

5.1 Demographic factors

Previous studies have focused on the role of socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, place of origin, and only child or not, but the conclusions are inconsistent. Ma [9] found that women have significantly higher fear of intimacy than men, and the fear of intimacy in the younger age group (18-24 years old) is significantly higher than that in the older age group (25-30 years old). However, the place of origin and only child or not have no significant impact on the fear of intimacy. Ji et al. [19] found that boys have higher FIS scores than girls, and non only children have higher FIS scores than only children. Dang [20] found that there are significant differences in the fear of intimacy based on romantic experience and grade, but no significant differences in gender, only child or not, and parental marital status.

5.2 Early experiences

Early traumatic experiences can reduce an individual's ability to establish and maintain intimate relationships, and have a negative impact on the development of intimate relationships. Numerous studies have shown that the fear of intimacy is significantly correlated with childhood experiences such as being taught by parents not to trust others, perception of parental harmony, perception of parental marital conflict, childhood abuse, early maladjustment, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. Ma [9] found that individuals with disharmonious parental relationships had significantly higher levels of intimacy fear than those with harmonious parental relationships. Participants who experienced childhood abuse had significantly higher intimacy fear than those who did not experience childhood abuse. Individuals who had experienced sexual harassment or assault had significantly higher intimacy fear than those who had not. Meng [21] found that perceived parental conflict during childhood positively predicts intimacy fear among college students. Senese et al [22] found that early maladjustment and parental rejection both positively predict adult intimacy fear, while early maladjustment plays a completely mediating role between parental rejection and adult intimacy fear, and this model is not affected by gender. Ji et al. [19]

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found that the FIS scores of college students were positively correlated with the total score of the Childhood Experience Questionnaire (CTQ-SF) and the scores of the three subscales of sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional abuse. Espeletta et al. [23] investigated the relationship between childhood abuse and adult intimacy fear, measuring the fear of rejection and abandonment, as well as discomfort (avoidance) in intimate relationships. They found that severe childhood abuse experiences, especially psychological abuse, including rejection, intimidation, isolation, and other forms of parental rejection, are associated with attachment anxiety and avoidance in adult romantic relationships, which are related to the fear of intimacy.

5.3 Current Love Experience

The intimacy fear of participants who are not currently in a romantic state is significantly higher than that of those who are in a romantic relationship [9]. The intimacy fear of participants without romantic experience was significantly higher than that of participants with romantic experience [9, 20, 24]. The intimacy fear of participants without sexual experience was significantly higher than that of those with sexual experience [9].

5.4 Psychological quality

5.4.1 Sexual awareness

An important obstacle to the development of sexual harmony may be the fear of sexual intercourse itself under the influence of social culture. Sexual anxiety can affect an individual's sexual function and also impact the quality of intimate relationships. Ma [9] pointed out that sexual anxiety positively predicts intimacy fear. In addition, sexual anxiety consists of five elements: the ability to control sexual behavior, the ability to recognize sex, the ability to recognize one's own sexual abilities, the ability to evaluate results and consequences, and the ability to take responsibility.

Daniel et al [25] explored the impacts of pornography motivations and outcomes on the fear of intimacy among college students. They identified the following four profiles: low motivation/average distress, porn for enjoyment, high motivation/average guilt, low motivation/high distress. Those in the high motivation/average guilt profile reported more difficulties of social well-being (including social support, fear of intimacy, and loneliness) relative to the other profiles and non-pornography consumers.

5.4.2 Negative self-awareness

Negative self-awareness can seriously affect individuals' self-evaluation in intimate relationships, making them fear of intimacy. Fan et al. [26] found that compared with high self-esteem individuals, individuals with moderate self-esteem ($OR=50115$, $P<0.001$) and those with low self-esteem ($OR=46.074$, $P<0.001$) are more likely to develop high intimacy fear. In interpersonal interactions, individuals lacking self-esteem tend to emphasize self-protection. They often have doubts about their partner's views and are very cautious about vulnerability and fear. They may feel that they are not worthy of love, and constantly doubt why others should open up to them or establish connections with them, thus avoiding situations where intimate relationships may occur.

Early adulthood is a critical period for acquiring intimacy. But only by establishing self-identity in the stage of adolescence can intimate relationships be better developed. In adolescence, individuals shift their attention to the internal world and explore and solve questions such as "Who am I," "What is the meaning of life," and "Why do people live. After entering early adulthood, they can choose suitable partners to connect with themselves and form intimate

relationships based on a clear understanding of their and others' self-identity. Otherwise, they will be troubled by interpersonal relationships and develop a fear of intimacy. Luo et al. [27] found that the acquisition of identity negatively predicted intimacy fear ($\beta=-0.30$, $P<0.01$), while the diffusion of identity positively predicted intimacy fear ($\beta=0.25$, $P<0.01$)

5.4.3 Adult attachment

Fan et al. [27] found that compared with secure attachment, individuals with conflicting attachment (OR=2.907, $P<0.05$), avoidant attachment (OR=6.301, $P<0.001$), and fearful attachment (OR=7.586, $P<0.001$) are more likely to develop high intimacy fear. Ma [9] found that adult attachment (attachment closeness, attachment dependence, attachment anxiety) can significantly predict intimacy fear. Scigala et al. [28] suggest that intimacy fear and negative emotion regulation play a chain mediated role between adult attachment and affective disorder. Han et al. [29] believe that self-disregard and self-esteem play a chain mediated role in adult attachment and intimacy fear.

5.4.4 Personality traits

Forest et al. [30] believe that self-esteem, self-disclosure, and empathy all negatively predict intimacy fear, and self-disclosure and empathy play a chain mediating role between self-esteem and intimacy fear. Ji et al. [19] found that individualism and collectivism have a significant impact on intimate fear, with higher levels of individualism leading to higher levels of intimate fear. Dang et al. [20] and Rice et al. [31] found that shame and affective disorders can positively predict intimacy fear, while resilience can negatively predict intimacy fear. Alexios and resilience play a chain mediated role between shame and intimacy fear. The specific mechanism is as follows: individuals who frequently experience shame are more likely to engage in self-criticism, and the accompanying depressive emotions can lead to a state of overall negativity, making it difficult for individuals to identify, describe, and regulate their emotions, resulting in the development of affective disorders [31]. Individuals with affective disorders often have problems with emotional self-regulation and exhibit insufficient ability to correctly identify and empathize with others' emotions [32]. However, emotional awareness, communication, and empathy are crucial in maintaining intimate relationships [33]. The difficulty in identifying, describing, and expressing emotions can significantly hinder emotional sharing and intimacy. Therefore, individuals with affective disorders often feel lonely and have difficulty maintaining intimate relationships, leading to fear of intimate relationships. Resilience refers to an individual's ability to maintain healthy and orderly development in the face of unfavorable factors. Therefore, resilience can help individuals with a sense of shame alleviate self-criticism and depressive emotions, and combat affective disorders and the resulting fear of intimacy.

6. Conclusion

Previous studies have reviewed the related issues (development process, outcomes, influencing factors, etc.) of intimacy fear among college students, providing useful reference opinions for understanding the mechanisms of intimacy related problems among college students and providing effective interventions. It has good theoretical and practical value, but there are some shortcomings. Firstly, previous studies have mostly used questionnaire methods, which are relatively single and prone to bias (such as common method bias). Secondly, previous studies have only been cross-sectional and cannot provide a good explanation of causal relationships. In the future, a combination of individual centered and longitudinal research perspectives can be used,

such as using latent category growth models and other analytical methods, to further explore the relationship between influencing factors such as attachment types, self-esteem, and intimacy fear.

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