ANXIETY AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY WITH STUDENTS OF THE FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF AMAZONAS (UFAM)

ANSIEDADE E UNIVERSITÁRIOS: ESTUDO DE CASO COM ESTUDANTES DA UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO AMAZONAS (UFAM)

ANSIEDAD Y ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS: UN ESTUDIO DE CASO CON ESTUDIANTES DE LA UNIVERSIDAD FEDERAL DE AMAZONAS (UFAM)

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ABSTRACT: College students are very likely to have high levels of anxiety. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to measure the prevalence of anxiety symptoms and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) with sociodemographic questions and self-report scales, namely: Beck Anxiety Scale (BAI) and General Anxiety Disorder – 7 (GAD-7). Descriptive statistics were used for analysis, in addition to the Kruskal – Wallis and Mann – Whitney U tests, and Spearman's correlation. A total of 400 students participated in the study, and it was concluded that anxiety was highly present in students, in addition to symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder.

KEYWORDS: University students. Anxiety. Generalized anxiety disorder. Mental health.

RESUMO: *Os estudantes universitários têm grande propensão a possuírem graus elevados de ansiedade. Portanto, o principal objetivo desse estudo é medir a prevalência de sintomas de ansiedade e Transtorno de Ansiedade Generalizada (TAG) com perguntas de aspecto sociodemográficos e escalas de autorrelato, sendo elas: Escala de Ansiedade de Beck (BAI) e General Anxiety Disorder -7 (GAD-7). Para análise foi utilizada estatística descritiva, além dos testes Kruskal-Wallis e Mann-Whitney U, e correlação de Spearman. Ao total participaram do estudo 400 alunos, e concluiu-se que a ansiedade esteve altamente presente nos alunos, além de sintomatologia de transtorno de ansiedade generalizada.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Universitários. Ansiedade. Transtorno de ansiedade generalizada. Saúde mental.*

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RESUMEN: *Los estudiantes universitarios son muy propensos a tener altos niveles de ansiedad. Por lo tanto, el objetivo principal de este estudio es medir la prevalencia de los síntomas de ansiedad y el Trastorno de Ansiedad Generalizada (TAG) con preguntas sociodemográficas y escalas de autoinforme, a saber: Escala de Ansiedad de Beck (BAI) y Trastorno de Ansiedad General -7 (GAD-7). Para el análisis se utilizó estadística descriptiva, además de las pruebas U de Kruskal-Wallis y Mann-Whitney, y la correlación de Spearman. En el estudio participaron un total de 400 estudiantes, y se concluyó que la ansiedad estaba muy presente en los estudiantes, además de los síntomas del trastorno de ansiedad generalizada.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Estudiantes universitarios. Ansiedad. Trastorno de ansiedad generalizada. Salud mental.*

Introduction

For a young Brazilian, the university represents the realization of a project of life not only professional, but also personal and family (OLIVEIRA; MORAIS, 2015; OLIVEIRA *et al*., 2018).

The transition to higher education is a process that implies many transformations, such as, in some cases, the change of city, the first distancing of parents, social changes, new financial expenses, as well as institutional, social, cultural, individual and academic factors (FAGUNDES *et al*., 2014; FRAGELLI; FRAGELLI, 2021; SANTOS *et al*., 2021).

In addition to bringing with it new demands typical of university life, such as: excessive study hours, higher level of study requirement during training, changes in sleep routines, new study methodologies, time organization, lack of family support, feeling of loneliness, among others (ARIÑO; BARDAGI, 2018; FRAGELLI; FRAGELLI, 2021; ZANCAN *et al*., 2021).

The majority of the university public is in the period between adolescence and adulthood, which implies many social, biological and psychological changes (OLIVEIRA *et al*., 2018). Biological changes involve a difference in the development of cortical regions and regions responsible for affective responses, which causes greater instability in mood and emotional reactivity (FRAGELLI; FRAGELLI, 2021). Psychological changes are linked to this phase that corresponds to the beginning of adulthood, in which most young people define their identity, which coincides with the period in which many are in university, causing a phase of great stress and great propensity to develop emotional problems (BEE, 1997).

Research has found that about 79.8% of Brazilian university students reported having suffered emotional distress in 2014. Among the greatest difficulties, anxiety was demarcated as the highest by about 58.36% of the students (FONAPRACE; ANDIFES, 2014).

Anxiety is a negative mood in relation to the future, characterized as a state of anticipation to danger, so it awakens in the individual a state of alertness, causing a reaction of escape or struggle, awakening of attention and an unpleasant internal sensation (DALGALARRONDO, 2008; STRATTON; HAYES, 1994).

Among the damages caused by anxiety are the decrease in attention, concentration and memory, and, consequently, the low performance of the individual in general (FERNANDES *et al*., 2018). In many cases, it is a positive, adaptive and normal feeling, as it can serve as a stimulus to increase our efforts and performance at work, or in studies, for example. However, it can become abnormal when it does not present a real reason to provoke anxiety, because the anxious may consider unrealistic situations threatening, which results in negative consequences for his life (HOLMES, 2007).

Thus, this work seeks to investigate the level of anxiety, present in undergraduate students of the Federal University of Amazonas (UFAM) and the demographic, academic and social aspects that may be linked to this factor, forming an overview of the illness of this population so that intervention measures can be implemented.

Population design

This is a cross-sectional analytical survey conducted through a self-report questionnaire and online collection for undergraduate students duly enrolled at the Manaus Campus of UFAM. The search link was made available through social networks. The study included 400 students aged 18 years or older from several undergraduate courses.

Sample calculation

The sample size calculation used as a basis the total of 20,614, equivalent to the total population of undergraduate students duly enrolled in the Manaus Campus. For the calculation, a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5% were defined, obtaining a sample of 374 students. During data collection, 400 students participated.

Variables and instruments

For data collection, a digital form made available through *Google Forms was used*. The form consisted of the following sections: Registration of the Free and Informed Consent Form; in this section, the participant indicated whether he would like to participate in the research or

not. In the following sessions, a sociodemographic questionnaire was first made available, in which the variables measured were: gender (male/female/prefer not to answer), age (18 to 22 years/23 to 25 years/26 years or more), course, year (1st/2nd/3rd or more), shift (morning/afternoon/night/full), work (yes/no). Then, the self-report scales were presented to measure the degree of anxiety present in this population.

The first was the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), in its version adapted to the Brazilian scenario, whose objective is to measure the intensity of anxiety symptoms. It consists of 21 questions that should be evaluated according to the sensations felt by the participant in the last week. These should be evaluated on a 4-point scale, at an increasing level: absolutely not; lightly; moderately; seriously; where the total score is the sum of the scores corresponding to the individual items (BECK; STEER, 1993).

The scores considered were 0 to 7 points as minimum level of anxiety, 8 to 15 indicate mild anxiety; scores of 16-25 reflect moderate anxiety; 26-63 indicate severe anxiety (BECK; STEER, 1993).

Next, the symptomatology of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) was evaluated using the GAD-7 scale, also in its version adapted to Brazil, with 7 questions. This scale evaluates the sensations felt by the participants in the last two weeks. The possible answers are: not once; several days; more than half of the days; and almost every day. The score is obtained through the sums of the individual responses. The result can be diagnosed as: 0 to 4 minimum, from 5 to 9 light level, the score from 10 to 14 indicate moderate level, and from 15 to 21 severe level. According to the original version, tag screening is presented from scores higher than 10 points with a higher balance of sensitivity (89%) and specificity (82%), thus, and this parameter is also used in this study (MORENO *et al.*, 2016; SPITZER *et al.*, 2006).

Data analysis

The data were transcribed in *Microsoft Excel* and later transported to the SPSS statistical package version 28.0.1.1 (15). The variables that corresponded to the sociodemographic characteristics of the subjects evaluated were analyzed descriptively. For comparison, the Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney nonparametric test were used, after normality assessments performed by the Kolmogorov Smirnov test. To verify the correlation between BAI and GAD-7 scores, Spearman's correlation test was used.

The significance level considered was 0.05.

Ethical aspects

The present study was approved by the Ethics and Research Committee with the opinion of number 5,285,579, on March 11, 2022. Participants completed a free and informed consent form agreeing to participate in the study.

Findings

The sample consisted of 65.5% (n=262) of females and 34.5% (n=138) male, 79.3% (n=317) aged between 18 and 22 years. Of these, 12.3% (n=49) study in the areas of Agricultural Sciences; 22.5% (n=90) in Human Sciences; 27.5% (n=110) in Biological Sciences; 37.8% (n=151) in Exact Sciences. Of the 46 courses that participated in the research, the highest number of students who answered was from the Design course with 11% (n=44); Medicine with 9% (n=36), and Food Engineering with 5.8% (n=23). About 72.5% (n=290) of students do not work and 65.3% (n=138) study at university full-time.

The mean anxiety score, verified in the students by the BAI scale, was 22.3 (standard deviation [SD] = 13.2), representing a moderate degree of anxiety, in which it was detected that most students presented severe anxiety with 37.5% (n=149), while 25.5% (n=102) presented moderate degree. The GAD-7 scale obtained a mean of 11.3 (SD=5.5), in which 55.7% (n=222) obtained GAD-7 GAD-7 symptomatology (score > 10 points).

Table 1 - Description of participants according to demographic, academic variables
and anxiety and TAG scores.

Sample of undergraduate students (N = 400) of UFAM Manaus campus.

Variáveis	n	%
Sexo		
Feminino	262	65,5
Masculino	138	34,5
Idade		
18 à 22 anos	317	79,3
23 à 25 anos	55	13,8
26 anos ou mais	28	7,0
Áreas		
Ciências Agrárias	49	12,3
Ciências Biológicas	110	27,5
Ciências Exatas	151	37,8
Ciências Humanas	90	22,5
Ano		
1º ano	138	34,5
2º ano	51	12,8
3º ano ou mais	211	52,8
Turno		
Manhã	86	21,5
Tarde	28	7,0
Noite	25	6,3
Integral	261	65,3
Trabalho		
Sim	110	27,5
Não	290	72,5
	Média	**DP**
Escala BAI	22,3	13,2
Escala GAD-7	11,3	5,5

Notes: n = absolute frequency by category; % = proportion by category; SD = standard deviation.
Source: Prepared by the authors

There were no significant differences regarding the degree of anxiety and the area of knowledge that the students belong to (BAI/x^2=5.971, df=3, p=113; GAD-7/ x^2= 3.069, df=3, p =381), as well as no significant differences in the degree of anxiety relative to the course year of the participants (BAI/x^2= 520, df=2, p=771; GAD-7/ x^2=2584, df=2, p=275). However, significance was found regarding GAD, a result of the GAD-7 scales, in relation to the students' study shift (x^2=9.688, df=3, p= 0.021), especially regarding the full shift (p= 0.027), i.e.,

students who study in this shift are more likely to have GAD. In this study, 63.6% (n=166) of the students, who study fully at the university, scored above 10 points, which characterizes TAG symptoms.

However, there were statistically significant associations between the BAI BECK and GAD-7 gender classifications, in which both presented intense classifications for females (BAI/x²=26.172, df=1, p=<0.001; GAD-7/ x²=26,632, df=1, p=<0.001). Approximately 44.3% (n=116) had severe anxiety and 27.5% (n=72) had moderate anxiety, while 36.2% (n=50) male respondents had mild levels of anxiety.

Table 2 - Correlations of demographic and academic variables, with the BAI and GAD-7 scales

Variáveis	BAI		GAD-7	
	Média	P	Média	P
Sexo				
Feminino	24,7	<,001	12,4	<,001
Masculino	17,8		9,3	
Áreas				
Ciências Agrárias	18,2		10,8	
Ciências Biológicas	23,1	,113	11,7	,381
Ciências Exatas	23,1		11,6	
Ciências Humanas	22,3		10,6	
Ano				
1º ano	22,5		11,9	
2º ano	21,1	,771	10,6	,275
3º ano ou mais	22,4		11,1	
Turno				
Manhã	21,1		11,2	
Tarde	21,3		10,1	
Noite	21,2	,780	8,4	0,021
Integral	22,9		11,7	
Trabalho				
Sim	23,9	,136	11,5	,755
Não	21,7		11,2	

*Significant difference: p < 0.05 - Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U Test
Source: Prepared by the authors

When performing the correlation test of variables, from spearman's correlation coefficient, a positive, strong and significant correlation (ρ=,727**) between the BAI anxiety index and gad-7 anxiety disorder was found. This result indicates that higher anxiety values are associated with higher values of anxiety disorder.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate anxiety levels, using the BAI and GAD-7 scales, present in undergraduate students of the Federal University of Amazonas (UFAM), and that demographic, academic and social factors may be associated with students' anxiety states. The female sex was the one with the highest levels of anxiety. This finding is in agreement with other studies (LEÃO *et al*., 2018; NASCIMENTO *et al*, 2020; SCHÖNHOFEN *et al*., 2020). This may be associated with some factors. According to Kinrys and Wygant (2005), what makes women twice as likely to have anxiety disorders, such as GAD, are two factors, one of which are genetic and hormonal factors that can play an important role in gender differences. Another aspect is the existing pressures in relation to the labor market, and economic independence, which implies competitive and stressful behaviors, in addition to the double working hours that involve domestic activities, including the roles of wife and mother (ROSA, 1998).

The areas of knowledge in this study were not related to the levels of anxiety detected, as well as in the study conducted by Maltoni, Palma and Neufeld (2019). However, other studies detect areas of the human sciences as more pre-disposed to anxiety and depression (BARROSO; OLIVEIRA; ANDRADE, 2019; NASCIMENTO *et al*, 2020).

Regarding the year of graduation, no associations with anxiety were observed, as well as in other studies (MALTONI; PALMA; NEUFELD, 2019; TRIGUEIRO *et al*., 2021). However, in the study by Barroso, Oliveira and Andrade (2019), higher rates of depression and loneliness were presented in undergraduate students in the initial periods of the course. Symptoms such as irritability and depression may also arise associated with anxiety, these feelings are secondary symptoms, as they come from anxiety, which is the primary symptom (HOLMES, 2007).

Second Dias *et al*. (2019), freshmen may present more stress due to being in the process of adapting to a new environment and new demands. Consequently, this new environment requires the student a new repertoire to adapt to this new reality, and new roles are defined (ARIÑO; BARDAGI, 2018; FAGUNDES *et al*., 2014). This process can be somewhat stressful and ansiogenic and, therefore, can directly impact the mental health of these individuals (ANDRIOLA; BARDAGI, 2021; ARIÑO; BARDAGI, 2018). Therefore, it is believed that the lack of a greater number of respondents from other years of course may have affected the results presented here, which is a limitation of the work.

Regarding the study shift, a higher level of anxiety was identified in students who study full-time at university. This factor may be associated with the high demand provided by

academic activities and aspects related to the university. In a national survey conducted in 2014, it sought to investigate several aspects of the life of the university student in the Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES), it was identified that 86.09% of the students encountered some difficulty related to their life or academic context (FONAPRACE; ANDIFES, 2014).

Among the difficulties, those that had the greatest impact on the permanence and academic performance, according to 42% of the university students, were financial difficulties, followed by the excessive load of work of the college (31.14%), lack of organization for study (28.78%), learning difficulties (16.22%), teacher-student relationship (19.8%), among others (FONAPRACE; ANDIFES, 2014).

Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the specific aspects that relate to university life, understanding the influence they may have on the mental illness of this population (ARIÑO; BARDAGI, 2018). Since such situations can interfere in academic performance, in the quality of relationships, leaving the university population prone to develop anxiety and depression, these diseases, according to the literature, are increasingly frequent and prevalent in this population (FIOCRUZ, 2017; MALTONI; PALMA; NEUFELD, 2019; SILVA; GUERRA, 2014).

Final considerations

The prevalence of university students with ANXIETY and TAG symptomatology reached high levels among UFAM students, which indicates the importance of investigating this problem, because anxiety is capable of bringing various symptoms or discomforts, such as dry mouth, tremors, stomach pains, chills, among others; may even evolve into more serious diseases, such as; anxiety disorders. The lack of adequate treatment for this stress can contribute to this disease interfering in studies generating poor academic performance, school failure and even dropout of studies (RULL *et al.*, 2011).

Given what has been exposed, it is essential to know more deeply the health-disease process of the university population, allowing them to have a higher quality of life education. Analyzing the importance of this phase, not only for professional development, but cognitive and personal, is necessary to have an intervention in this reality, promoting a period of higher education without illness by academic factors (ARIÑO; BARDAGI, 2018).

Therefore, it is proposed for further work to investigate in more depth what factors the anxiety of this population is linked so that it is possible to envision an intervention in a meaningful and effective way.

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