

Diagnostic Specificity in Childhood Anxiety Disorders: Familial and Environmental Influences

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Background:

Anxiety disorders are the most common form of psychopathology in children. They have a significant adverse impact on children's general socio-emotional functioning and commonly persist into adulthood. The role of negative life events and familial and environmental adversity have been linked to their development. To date, however, studies have tended to group together different diagnoses of childhood anxiety disorders, and the idea that there is diagnostic specificity of these risk factors has received scant attention, despite emerging supportive evidence (Tiet et al., 2001).

Aims:

The study aims to examine the association between

social/environmental adversity

And the following childhood anxiety disorders;

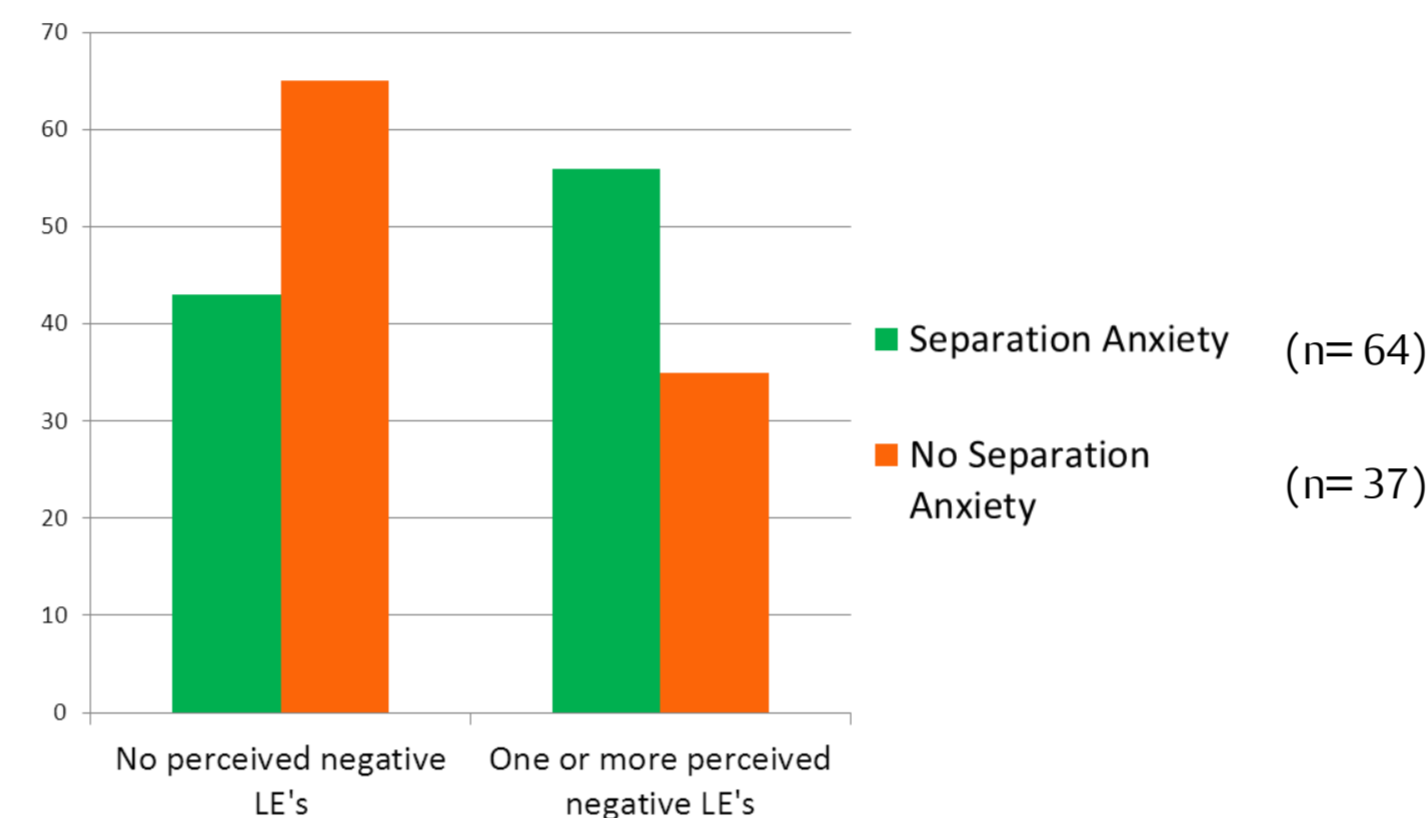
- **Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD)**
- **Social Phobia (SoPh)**
- **Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)**
- **Specific Phobias (SpPh)**

Method:

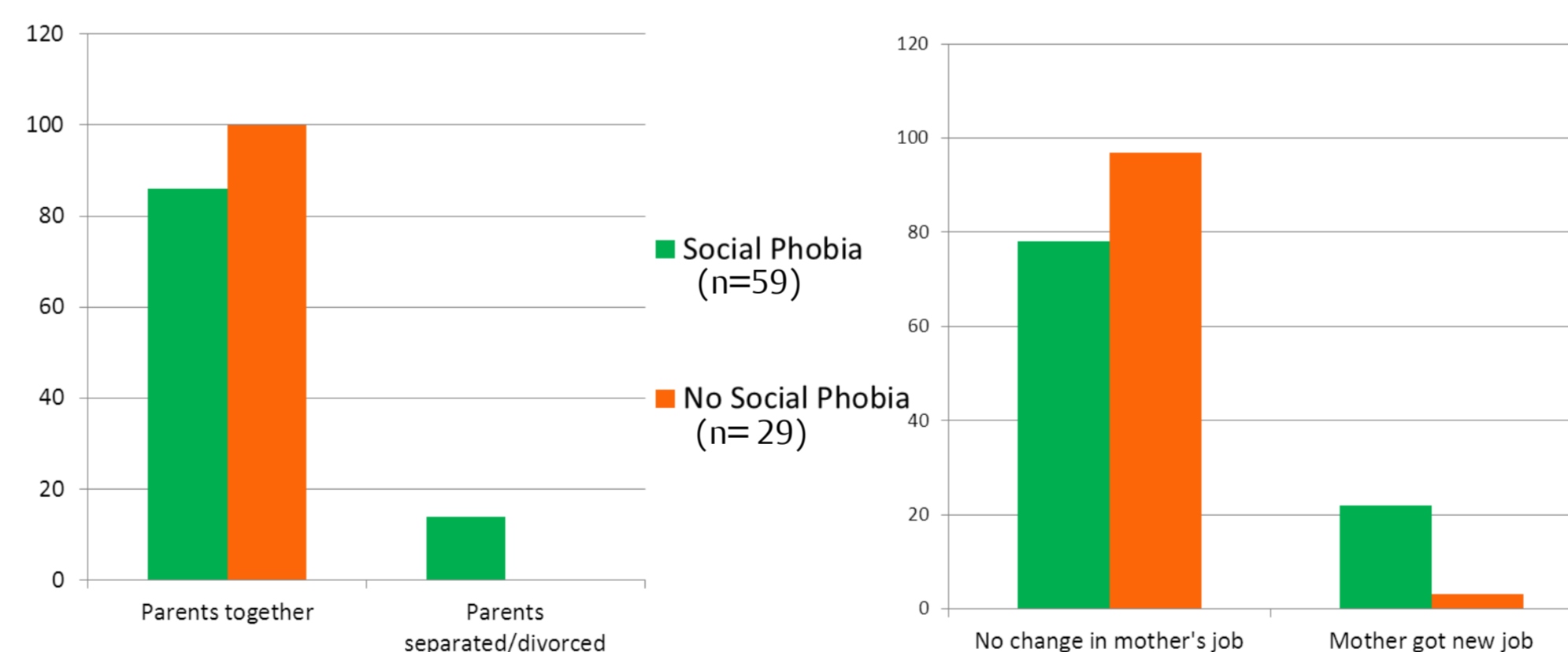
- This study is based within the **Berkshire Child Anxiety Clinic**.
- **Participants:** 200 children (age 7-12) with a primary diagnosis of anxiety, and their mothers
- **Measures:**
 - ADIS-DSM IV-C/P (Anxiety Disorders Interview)
 - Life Events Checklist Questionnaire

Preliminary Results from Questionnaire Data (n=101):

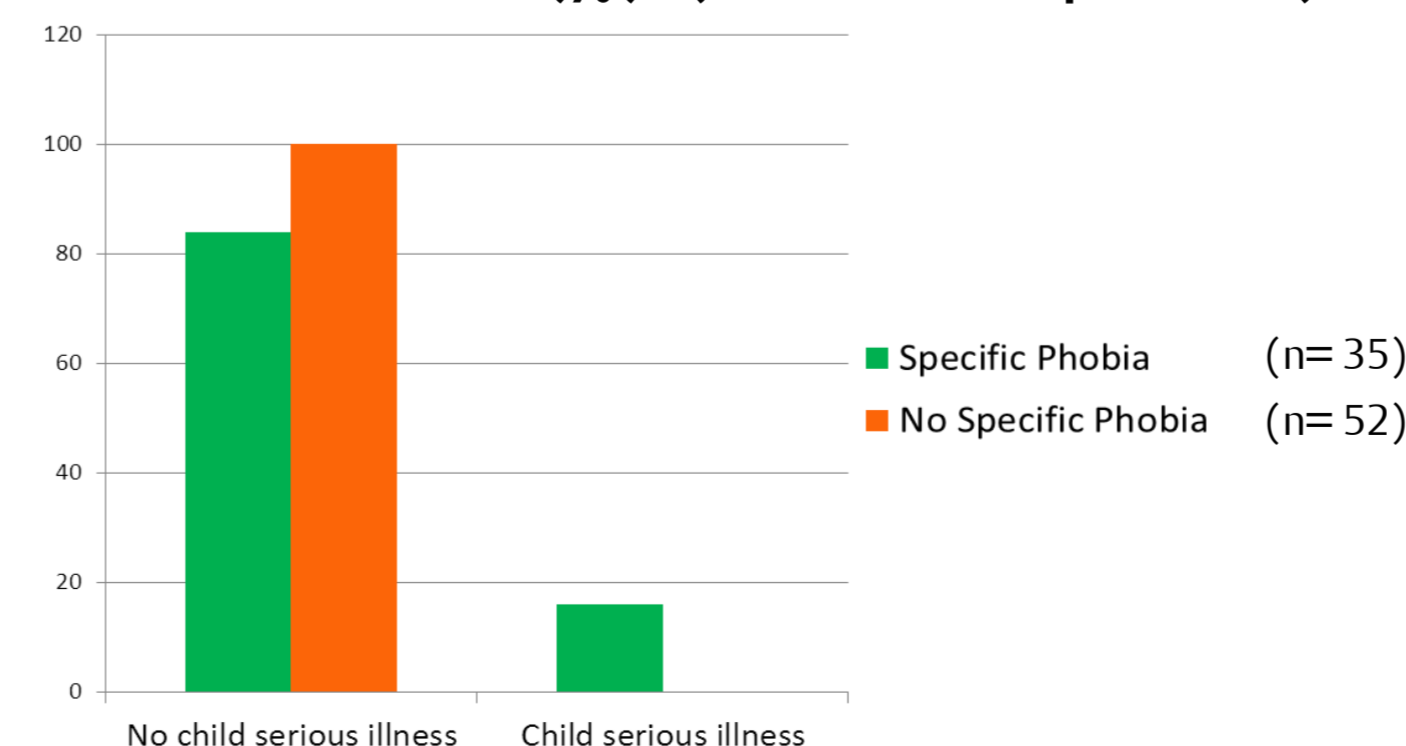
- **SAD** associated with:
 - Overall mother reported negative life events ($\chi(1)^2 = 4.19, p = .04$)



- **SoPh** associated with:
 - Separated/divorced parents ($\chi(1)^2 = 4.61, p = .03$)
 - Mothers with new job ($\chi(1)^2 = 5.02, p = .03$)



- **SpPh** associated with:
 - Recent serious illness ($\chi(1)^2 = 7.88, p = .01$)



Summary:

Preliminary findings suggest that the experience of specific negative life events may be associated with specific anxiety disorders.

Future Research:

- Full dataset (n=200) to be analysed
- On-going research includes broader assessment of environmental adversity and more detailed consideration of family factors using
 - Observational methodology of parenting
 - Additional questionnaire measures regarding environmental adversity and family dysfunction

Clinical Implications

Further understanding of factors associated with the development of specific childhood anxiety disorders is likely to lead to the development of more focused prevention and intervention strategies to reduce risk and improve outcomes.



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