

Career Anxiety and Psychological Distress Among Students Preparing for TNPSC Group Examinations

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at career anxiety and psychological distress in students preparing for TNPSC exams at private coaching centres. Competitive exams in India are very demanding and often create significant emotional and psychological pressure for aspirants. The study used a descriptive research design with a sample of 58 TNPSC aspirants chosen through stratified sampling. Data were gathered using the Career Anxiety Scale, Psychological Distress Scale, and a socio-demographic questionnaire. The researchers analyzed the data using percentage analysis and Pearson's correlation. The findings show that many aspirants face moderate to high levels of career anxiety and psychological distress. A positive correlation was found between career anxiety and psychological distress. This means that more uncertainty and pressure related to career prospects lead to greater emotional strain. The study emphasizes the need for psychological support, stress management programs, and social work initiatives in coaching centres to support the mental health of exam aspirants.

Keywords: Career Anxiety, Psychological Distress, TNPSC Aspirants, Competitive Examination, Stress, Coaching Centres

Introduction

In Tamil Nadu, government employment continues to hold a prestigious position in society, often perceived as a pathway to long-term job security, stable income, pension benefits, and enhanced social recognition. For many families, securing a government post is not merely an individual achievement but a collective aspiration that symbolizes upward social mobility and financial assurance. Within this context, the Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPSC) plays a central role by conducting Group I, II, III, and IV examinations to recruit candidates into various administrative and public service departments. Each year, lakhs of aspirants apply for a comparatively limited number of vacancies, creating intense competition and elevating the psychological demands associated with preparation.

The preparation process for TNPSC Group examinations is often rigorous and prolonged. Aspirants are required to master an extensive syllabus that includes general studies, current affairs, aptitude, and subject-specific content. Many candidates dedicate several years to preparation, frequently making multiple attempts before achieving success. This long-term commitment often involves substantial financial investment in private coaching centres, study materials, and mock tests. For some aspirants, especially those from rural or economically constrained backgrounds, these investments may create additional pressure to succeed within a limited time frame.

While academic preparation remains the primary focus of aspirants and coaching institutions, the psychological dimensions of this journey are comparatively underexplored. The uncertainty surrounding examination outcomes, fear of failure, societal expectations, peer comparison, and age-related constraints contribute to heightened emotional strain. In such an environment, career anxiety becomes a prominent psychological concern. Career anxiety refers to persistent worry, apprehension, and fear related to future employment prospects, career progression, and the possibility of not meeting personal or familial expectations. Among TNPSC aspirants, this anxiety may manifest as constant overthinking about results, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, irritability, and reduced self-confidence.

When career anxiety persists over an extended period without adequate coping mechanisms or emotional support, it can lead to broader psychological distress. Psychological distress encompasses symptoms such as chronic stress, generalized anxiety, mood fluctuations, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of helplessness. The repeated cycle of preparation, examination, waiting for results, and potential failure can intensify these symptoms. Additionally, social comparison with peers who secure employment earlier may further aggravate distress levels, affecting both mental well-being and academic performance.

Despite the significant number of candidates preparing for TNPSC examinations in Tamil Nadu, limited empirical attention has been given to understanding the psychological impact of this competitive environment. Exam-focused research often emphasizes success strategies, syllabus analysis, or performance outcomes, while the emotional experiences of aspirants remain underrepresented in academic literature. Understanding the relationship between career anxiety and psychological distress is therefore essential for developing supportive interventions within coaching centres and educational settings.

This study aims to examine the relationship between career anxiety and psychological distress among students preparing for TNPSC Group examinations. By identifying the extent to which career-related worries contribute to psychological strain, the research seeks to provide evidence-based insights that can inform mental health support strategies, counseling interventions, and policy-level initiatives. Ultimately, addressing these psychological dimensions is crucial not only for improving examination performance but also for safeguarding the overall well-being of aspirants navigating the highly competitive TNPSC examination process.

Review of Literature

A growing body of research from India highlights that students preparing for high-stakes competitive examinations frequently experience **elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and psychological distress** due to academic pressure, uncertainty of results, and social and parental expectations. Although specific studies on TNPSC aspirants are limited, findings from research on medical, engineering, and other competitive exam contexts provide important parallels that can inform understanding of career anxiety among TNPSC candidates.

M. A. Azeem (2018) studied “Academic Anxiety and Academic Achievement of Secondary School Students.” This research looked at the connection between academic anxiety and performance among 340 school students in Aligarh. The study used the Academic Anxiety Scale created by Siddiqui and Rehman to measure anxiety levels. The findings showed no significant difference between male and female students in their levels of academic anxiety. The study points out that academic anxiety impacts students in the same way, regardless of gender, and stresses the importance of supportive academic environments to improve achievement.

Rao B. V. Ramana and Anjali Chaturvedi (2019) conducted a study titled “Academic Anxiety of Secondary School Students in Relation to Gender and Locality.” They examined how gender and location affect academic anxiety among secondary school students. The study involved 500 students from various backgrounds. To measure academic anxiety, the researchers used the Academic Anxiety Scale created by A. K. Singh and Alpana Sen Gupta. The main goal of the study was to find out if there were significant differences in anxiety levels based on gender and location, specifically rural and urban areas. The results showed that students from rural and urban areas had noticeably different levels of academic anxiety. This indicates that environmental factors, such as educational resources, parental expectations, and exposure to competition, may impact students’ anxiety levels. The study emphasizes the need to consider socio-demographic factors when addressing academic stress. It also suggests that tailored interventions are necessary to help reduce anxiety among secondary school students.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted a **descriptive research design** to examine the relationship between career anxiety and psychological distress among students preparing for TNPSC Group examinations. A descriptive design was considered appropriate because the study aims to describe the existing levels of career anxiety and psychological distress and to identify the relationship between these variables without manipulating any conditions. This design enables the researcher to systematically collect, analyze, and interpret data from a

specific population in its natural setting. It is particularly suitable for social science research where the objective is to understand behavioral and psychological phenomena as they occur.

Study Area

The study was conducted among TNPSC aspirants enrolled in private coaching centres. These coaching centres provide structured guidance and training for various TNPSC Group examinations.

Population

The population of the study consisted of all students preparing for TNPSC Group examinations in selected private coaching centres.

Sample

The total sample comprised **58 TNPSC aspirants** who were actively preparing for Group examinations at the time of data collection. The respondents included both male and female aspirants belonging to different age groups and educational backgrounds.

The sample size was determined based on accessibility and willingness of participants to take part in the study.

Sampling Technique

A **stratified sampling technique** was used for selecting the respondents. In this method, the population was divided into different strata based on relevant characteristics such as age, gender, or educational qualification. From each stratum, respondents were selected proportionately to ensure adequate representation of different subgroups within the population.

Sources of Data

Primary Data

Primary data were collected directly from the respondents using standardized psychological scales and a structured questionnaire.

Secondary Data

Secondary data were collected from books, journals, previous research studies, articles, and online resources related to career anxiety, psychological distress, and competitive examination stress.

Tools Used for Data Collection

1. Career Anxiety Scale

The Career Anxiety Scale was used to measure the level of anxiety related to career uncertainty, employment concerns, and fear of failure among TNPSC aspirants. The scale consists of structured statements assessing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of career-related anxiety. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement using a Likert-type scale.

The scale helps in identifying:

- Fear regarding future employment
- Worry about exam performance
- Uncertainty about career success
- Pressure related to career expectations

Higher scores indicate higher levels of career anxiety.

2. Psychological Distress Scale

Psychological distress was measured using a standardized Psychological Distress Scale, which assesses symptoms related to stress, emotional strain, nervousness, and general mental discomfort. The scale includes multiple items rated on a Likert scale reflecting frequency or intensity of distress symptoms.

The tool evaluates:

- Emotional instability
- Stress symptoms
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Anxiety-related manifestations

Higher scores reflect greater psychological distress.

3. Socio-Demographic Questionnaire

A structured socio-demographic questionnaire was developed by the researcher to collect background information about the respondents. It included details such as:

- Age
- Gender
- Educational qualification
- First-generation career pursuit status

This information was used to analyze patterns and variations in career anxiety and psychological distress across different demographic groups.

Procedure of Data Collection

Before collecting data, permission was obtained from the concerned coaching centre authorities. The purpose of the study was clearly explained to the respondents. Informed consent was obtained from each participant.

The questionnaires were distributed personally to the aspirants, with instructions provided on how to respond to each item. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential, participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. The completed questionnaires were collected and verified for completeness before analysis.

Statistical Techniques Used

The collected data were coded and entered into statistical software for analysis. The following statistical techniques were used:

1. Percentage Analysis

Percentage analysis was used to describe the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. It helped in presenting the distribution of respondents according to age, gender, educational qualification, and other background variables.

2. Pearson's Correlation Coefficient

Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used to examine the relationship between Career Anxiety and Psychological Distress.

The correlation coefficient (r) measures:

Direction of relationship (positive or negative)

Strength of relationship (weak, moderate, strong)

The significance level (p -value) was tested at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

If $p < 0.01$, the relationship is considered statistically significant.

Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained.
- Data were used solely for academic purposes.
- No psychological harm was caused to respondents.

Chapter IV – Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Table 4.1 – Age Distribution

44.83% of the respondents belong to the age group 19–23 years, 31.03% are above 24 years, and 24.14% are below 18 years. This indicates that the majority of TNPSC aspirants fall within the young adult age group.

Age of the respondents	Number of Respondents	Percentage
19-23 age	26	44.83
Above 24 age	18	31.03
Below 18 age	14	24.14
Total	58	100

Gender of the responders	Number of respondents	Percentage
Male	44	75.9
Female	14	24.1
Total	58	100

up, suggesting early engagement in competitive exam preparation.

Table 4.2 – Gender Distribution

75.9% of the respondents are male, while 24.1% are female. This shows that male aspirants constitute a larger proportion of the sample.

Table 4.3 – Educational Qualification

Educational qualification	Number of Respondents	Percentage
12th Pass	14	24.1
Under Graduate	17	29.3
Post Graduate	22	37.9
PhD	5	8.6
Total	58	100

37.9% of the respondents are postgraduates, 29.3% are undergraduates, 24.1% have completed 12th standard, and 8.6% possess a Ph.D. degree. This indicates that most aspirants are highly educated, with a significant number having completed postgraduate studies.

Table 4.4 – First-Generation Career Pursuit

Educational qualification	Number of Respondents	Percentage
12th Pass	14	24.1
Under Graduate	17	29.3

Post Graduate	22	37.9
PhD	5	8.6
Total	58	100

69% of respondents reported that they are the first person in their family to pursue this specific career path, while 31% are not. This suggests that many aspirants may experience additional pressure as first-generation candidates striving for stable government employment.

Correlation Analysis

Hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant relationship between Career Anxiety and Psychological Distress among TNPSC aspirants.

Table – Relationship Between age and Career Anxiety and Psychological Distress (N = 58)

Correlations				
		Psychological Distress	Career Anxiety	AGE
Psychological Distress	Pearson Correlation	1	.530**	.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.913
	N	58	58	58
Career Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	.530**	1	-.094
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.483
	N	58	58	58
Age	Pearson Correlation	.015	-.094	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.913	.483	

	N	58	58	58
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Interpretation

The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.530$) indicates a moderate positive relationship between Career Anxiety and Psychological Distress. The significance value ($p = .000$) is less than 0.01, showing that the relationship is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

This means that as career anxiety increases among TNPSC aspirants, psychological distress also increases. Aspirants who experience greater uncertainty and fear regarding their career prospects are more likely to report emotional strain and stress.

Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that TNPSC aspirants experience considerable levels of career anxiety, which significantly correlates with psychological distress. The moderate positive correlation indicates that career-related worries are a substantial contributing factor to emotional instability among aspirants.

The socio-demographic findings further suggest that:

Young adults dominate the aspirant population.

A majority are first-generation candidates.

A high proportion possess advanced educational qualifications.

These factors may collectively increase performance pressure, family expectations, and fear of failure, thereby intensifying anxiety and distress.

The results align with existing literature on competitive examination stress in India, which highlights the psychological burden associated with high-stakes recruitment processes.

Conclusion

The study concludes that career anxiety is significantly associated with psychological distress among students preparing for TNPSC Group examinations. Aspirants face emotional challenges due to uncertainty, competition, family expectations, and repeated attempts.

Given the significant positive correlation between career anxiety and psychological distress, it is essential to provide psychological counselling support in coaching centres, conduct stress management and resilience training programmes, and promote awareness about mental health among competitive exam aspirants. Encourage balanced preparation strategies to prevent burnout.

Addressing psychological well-being is crucial not only for examination success but also for the long-term mental health of aspirants.

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