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Six Out Of 10 University Students Have Math Anxiety, Spanish Study Finds

ScienceDaily (Apr. 1, 2009) — Six out of every 10 university students, regardless their field of study, present symptoms of anxiety when it comes to dealing with mathematics, according to a research work carried out at the University of Granada in Spain. In addition, there are significant differences between men and women, with men suffering less anxiety when it comes to dealing with mathematical tasks (47% of men versus 62% of women).

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The research has been carried out by professors Patricia Pérez-Tyteca, Enrique Castro, Isidoro Segovia, Encarnación Castro and Francisco Fernández, of the department of Didactics of Mathematics of the UGR, and Francisco Cano, of the department of Evolutionary and Education Psychology. This study was carried out in a sample consisting of 885 first-year students from 23 different degrees given at the UGR which include the subject of mathematics, both compulsory and core. The sample included four of the five university fields of study: Health Sciences, Experimental Sciences, Technical Education and Social Sciences.

The symptoms of mathematical anxiety

The researchers assessed the students using the Fennema-Sherman Mathematics Attitudes Scales, a questionnaire validated by experts from all over the world which has been used since the 70s. The students took the questionnaire at the beginning of the second four-month period of school.

Mathematical anxiety appears through a series of symptoms “such as tension, nervousness, concern, worry, edginess, impatience, confusion, fear and mental block” when dealing with the subject of mathematics, according to the researchers of the University of Granada.

This work has also revealed that there are significant differences in the students’ attitude towards mathematics depending on their field of study. It was found that the students of degrees of the field of Health Sciences are those who fear mathematics the most (they show more anxiety), whereas those studying Technical Education, are the less concerned.

According to the researchers, “an indirect effect of mathematical anxiety is that of avoiding studies related to mathematics, which later conditions the type of degree they can choose.” In other words, many students choose degrees different to those they preferred –and in which they would be really good in many cases – in order to avoid studying subjects connected with mathematics, according to the researchers.

Part of the results of this work have been published in the journals “Indivisa: Boletín de Estudios e Investigación”, “Investigación en Educación Matemática” and “Revista de Educación de la Universidad de Granada”.

Adapted from materials provided by University of Granada.

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