Impact of Negative Self-Presentation Concerns on Social Anxiety During a Presentation

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INTRODUCTION

The core feature of social anxiety is fear of negative evaluation by others. Socially anxious individuals judge themselves as likely to be evaluated negatively by others in part due to a discrepancy between their perceptions of themselves and how others perceive them. Specifically, socially anxious individuals have been shown to view themselves in a much harsher light than others. Most of this research has focused on the dimensions of concern about adequacy of social performance and visibility of anxiety symptoms (Norton & Hope, 2001). Much less research has focused on the role of concerns about physical appearance in social anxiety.

Recently, Moscovitch (2010) has proposed a theoretical model of social phobia that includes an explicit emphasis on the relevance of concerns about physical appearance to social anxiety. Moscovitch (under review) has suggested that the fear stimuli for social anxiety are best described as falling into three categories of concern about inadequacy: (1) physical appearance, (2) anxiety symptoms, and (3) social competence. However, little research has addressed the relevance of all three of these dimensions to social anxiety. The following hypotheses were tested:

1) Higher scores on the dimensions of physical appearance, anxiety symptoms, and social competence would be associated with higher scores on overall anxiety as measured by worry and fear of negative evaluation and SRF-P anxiety during the speech for the whole sample. See Table 1.

2) Previous research findings that socially anxious participants rate their overall anxiety as higher and their anxiety about physical appearance to social anxiety. Moscovitch (under review) has suggested that the fear stimuli for social anxiety are best described as falling into three categories of concern about inadequacy: (1) physical appearance, (2) anxiety symptoms, and (3) social competence. However, little research has addressed the relevance of all three of these dimensions to social anxiety. The following hypotheses were tested:

3) Socially anxious individuals would rate their anxiety about their looks during a speech task as greater than an observer.

MEASURES (Continued)

Negative Self-Portraiture Scale (NSPS; Moscovitch, under review)

- Measure consists of three subscales assessing concerns proposed to serve as fear stimuli for socially anxious individuals:
  - Physical appearance subscale
  - Social competence subscale
  - Anxiety symptoms subscale

- Consists of 27 items which are rated on a 0-5 scale, with descriptive anchors being “not at all concerned,” “slightly concerned,” “moderately concerned,” “very concerned,” and “extremely concerned.”

Speech Rating Form – Participant Version (SRF-P; Norton & Hope, 2001)

- Consists of the following three items:
  - Please rate the greatest amount of anxiety you experienced during your presentation by circling the appropriate number (0 = totally relaxed; 100 = severely anxious).
  - Please rate the quality of your presentation. Indicate how well you communicated what you wanted to say by circling the appropriate number (0 = unable to speak; 100 = able to communicate what I wanted).
  - Please rate how concerned you felt about your physical appearance/looks while giving your speech (0 = unconcerned; 100 = extremely concerned).

Speech Rating Form – Observer Version (SRF - O; Norton & Hope, 2001)

- A modified version of the SRF-P.
- Wording of the 3 items was changed so that the form could be completed by an observer.

PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited via a sign-up sheet outside of the psychology department and by word of mouth. Participants were run individually. After completing informed consent, participants were given two questionnaires (FNE, NSPS). Similar to the procedure used by Wong and Moulds (2009), the participants were asked to choose between one of two different controversial topics (i.e., Advantages and Disadvantages of the Death Penalty; Advantages and Disadvantages of Animal Testing) for a presentation.

The participants were then given one minute to prepare for their three minute speech. They were informed that the experimenter and two research assistants would be making ratings about their performance and that they would also be asked to rate their own performance. The participants spoke in front of a video camera and the experimenter for three minutes. After rating their performance on the SRF-P, participants were debriefed and dismissed. The experimenter, who was blind to the participant’s questionnaire scores, rated the performance on the SRF-O. The participant was then thanked and debriefed.

RESULTS

Consistent with predictions, the NSPS subscales of physical appearance, anxiety symptoms, and social competence were significantly positively correlated with fear of negative evaluation and SRF-P anxiety during the speech for the whole sample. See Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation of NSPS subscales and Measures of Social Anxiety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NSPS Anxiety Symptoms</th>
<th>NSPS Physical Appearance</th>
<th>NSPS Social Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale</td>
<td>.515*</td>
<td>.507*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRF-Participant Anxiety during the Speech</td>
<td>.425*</td>
<td>.410*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05.

Three paired samples t-test were used to compare participant versus observer ratings on the three NSPS subscales. Only highly anxious individuals were used in this analysis (n = 16). Consistent with predictions, all analyses revealed significant differences between participant and observer ratings. See Figure 1.

DISCUSSION

The results lend support to Moscovitch’s theory that concerns about anxiety symptoms, social competence, and physical appearance are associated with social anxiety. In the current study, these domains of concern were associated with both a trait measure (i.e., fear of negative evaluation scale) and a state measure (i.e., SRF-P anxiety) of social anxiety. Results also replicated previous research showing that socially anxious individuals are more critical of themselves than others are of them in terms of visibility of anxiety symptoms and performance quality. Consistent with Moscovitch’s model, observers were also less concerned about the socially anxious individuals’ appearance than the socially anxious individuals were. Although concerns about physical appearance in social anxiety have not been widely studied in the literature, the current study found these concerns to be associated with social anxiety and to be distorted relative to the perception of others. Concerns about physical appearance may be an important therapy target for socially anxious individuals.

A limitation of the current study is that reliability ratings for the observer were not available. Future research may wish to examine whether sex differences exist on any of the variables examined in this study.

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