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Review article

The aetiology and maintenance of social anxiety disorder: A synthesis of complimentary theoretical models and formulation of a new integrated model

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ABSTRACT

Background: Within maintenance models of social anxiety disorder (SAD), a number of cognitive and behavioural factors that drive the persistence of SAD have been proposed. However, these maintenance models do not address how SAD develops, or the origins of the proposed maintaining factors. There are also models of the development of SAD that have been proposed independently from maintenance models. These models highlight multiple factors that contribute risk to the onset of SAD, but do not address how these aetiological factors may lead to the development of the maintaining factors associated with SAD.

Methods: A systematic review of the literature was conducted to identify aetiological and maintenance models of SAD. We then united key factors identified in these models and formulated an integrated aetiological and maintenance (IAM) model of SAD. A systematic review of the literature was then conducted on the components of the IAM model.

Results: A number of aetiological and maintaining factors were identified in models of SAD. These factors could be drawn together into the IAM model. On balance, there is empirical evidence for the association of each of the factors in the IAM model with social anxiety or SAD, providing preliminary support for the model.

Limitations: There are relationships between components of the IAM model that require empirical attention. Future research will need to continue to test the IAM model.

Conclusions: The IAM model provides a framework for future investigations into the development and persistence of SAD.

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1. Introduction

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is characterised by a recurrent and intense anxious response to social or performance situations in which evaluation from other people may occur (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Incidence rates for the disorder are highest during childhood and adolescence (e.g., between 10 and 20 years of age; Beesdo et al., 2007; Wittchen et al., 1999) and once the disorder manifests, it typically follows a chronic course (Wittchen and Fehm, 2003). Prominent psychological models of the maintenance of SAD specify key cognitive and behavioural factors that account for the continued experience of social-evaluative anxiety in individuals who are already diagnosed with SAD (Clark and Wells, 1995; Heimberg et al., 2010; Hofmann, 2007; Rapee and Heimberg, 1997). These models have stimulated a large body of research and treatment protocols derived from these models have been found to be efficacious (e.g., Clark et al., 2003; Rapee et al., 2009). By their nature, these models aim to describe the maintaining factors of SAD. However, they do not specify in detail an aetiological basis for the disorder or indicate how the maintaining factors might develop. Largely independently of these maintenance models, several aetiological models for SAD have also been proposed (e.g., Hofmann and Barlow, 2002; Rapee and Spence, 2004). These latter models specify biological, psychological, and social factors that increase risk for the development of SAD. However, these models do not specify the origins of factors that maintain the disorder, or point to links between aetiological and maintaining factors. Although there have been efforts to integrate the aetiology and maintenance of SAD (Higa-McMillan and Ebesutani, 2011; Kimbrel, 2008), there is currently still no model that comprehensively integrates what are considered to be the key aetiological and maintaining factors of SAD in the literature.

In this paper, we aim to develop such a model. We first present a systematic review of the theoretical literature on SAD to ascertain existing aetiological and maintenance models of the disorder and related review papers. The broad coverage of this systematic review allows us to determine a comprehensive set of aetiological and maintaining factors for SAD that are proposed in the literature and considered to be theoretically important. Next, we unite these factors and present an integrated aetiological and maintenance (IAM) model of SAD. Alongside our descriptions of the components of this model, we present a systematic review of the empirical literature on each component and specify which parts of the model require further empirical testing. Again, the broad coverage of these systematic reviews allows us to determine the extent of empirical support for each of the components of the model. In the final section, we elaborate upon directions for future research based on our integrated model. As will be evident, the IAM model adds incremental value to the literature over and above existing aetiological and maintenance models because it encompasses a comprehensive set of aetiological and maintaining factors currently considered to be theoretically significant and is based on a thorough examination of the empirical literature. Moreover, the IAM model specifies novel links between aetiological and maintaining factors, clarifies novel research directions, and should help to improve both treatment and prevention.

2. Method

2.1. Systematic search strategy

Models related to the aetiology and maintenance of SAD were obtained via an examination of articles (including reference lists) that were found from a systematic electronic database search of PsycINFO and Scopus using combinations of the following keywords: theory, theoretical, model, social anxiety, social phobia, and social anxiety disorder. A similar search strategy was used when obtaining studies for the empirical evaluation of the components of the IAM model (e.g., for anticipatory processing, the above databases were searched using a combination of the key terms: anticipatory processing, social anxiety, social phobia, and social anxiety disorder). The following inclusion criteria for articles were also applied to all database searches: (a) reported in English, (b) abstract available, (c) for PsycINFO year published between 1900 and 2015, and for Scopus year published between 1960 and 2015, and (d) article contained in journal or book. In addition, the database search for models of SAD was restricted to reviews. After unique articles were obtained from the database searches, the titles and abstracts of articles were screened to determine their relevance. Articles that could be immediately excluded during screening were removed from further consideration. Full texts of articles that passed the screening were then obtained. For the database search for models of SAD, full text articles were assessed for whether they contained such a model. For the search for studies for the empirical evaluation of the components of the IAM model, full text articles were evaluated as to whether it contained a study that examined an empirical relationship between the factor/process of interest and social anxiety or SAD.

3. Results and discussion

Search results are shown in Tables 1–4, and these tables are also referred to in the relevant sections below. Given space limitations, cited articles in this paper are only illustrative of the pattern of findings from our systematic searches and are not exhaustive. Where possible, recent papers have been cited.[1]

3.1. Factors involved in the aetiology of SAD

Over the last 20 years, a number of reviews of risk factors for SAD along with theories about their interrelationships have been published (e.g., Morrison and Heimberg, 2013; Higa-McMillan and Ebesutani, 2011; Kimbrel, 2008; Ollendick and Benoit, 2012; Wong

[1] Database search strings and complete lists of articles obtained from all searches are available upon request from the first author.

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