Individual differences in social hypersensitivity predict the interpretation of ambiguous feedback and self-esteem[☆]

Kaite Yang[a,*], Joan S. Girgus[b]

[a] Department of Psychology, School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Stockton University, Galloway, NJ, United States of America
[b] Department of Psychology, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, United States of America

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Ambiguity may be an unavoidable part of everyday interactions. The reactions of socially hypersensitive people (i.e., self-esteem contingent on maintaining positive relationships) to ambiguous feedback may go beyond discomfort to injury to self-esteem. In the present research, we examined whether and how there might be a relationship between social hypersensitivity and self-esteem that depends on social feedback.
Method: In two experiments, participants read scripts containing different types of social feedback (Studies 1 and 2). In two correlational studies, we examined the relationships among social hypersensitivity, perceived valence of ambiguous events and self-esteem and among social hypersensitivity, intolerance of uncertainty and self-esteem (Studies 3a and 3b).
Results: Social hypersensitivity was negatively correlated with state self-esteem when participants imagined a conversation with a controversial statement followed by a pause, by explicit ambiguous feedback, or by explicit negative feedback (Studies 1 and 2). The perceived valence of ambiguous events and the amount of tolerance for uncertainty partially mediated the relationship between social hypersensitivity and trait self-esteem (Studies 3a and 3b).
Conclusions: Individuals who are socially hypersensitive interpret ambiguous feedback more negatively and have a lower tolerance for uncertainty than people who are less socially hypersensitive, and this in turn predicts lower self-esteem.

1. Introduction

Social interactions are often fraught with ambiguity. While explicit positive and negative feedback may be encountered during formal performance reviews at work, in frank conversations, and during outright conflict, much of the social information garnered from interactions is of a tacit or ambiguous nature. The ubiquity of ambiguous feedback is supported by research showing that humans are particularly attuned to slight changes in the valence of social feedback and are sensitive to the detection of potential negative feedback (Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998; Williams, 2009). Negative information bias may actually confer an adaptive advantage if subtle clues about others' evaluations toward oneself can be quickly detected and allow for behavior modification (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

While some degree of sensitivity to ambiguous information may be necessary for smooth social interactions, not everyone reacts to social interactions –real, imagined, or remembered –in the same way. Highly socially anxious individuals, compared to less socially anxious individuals, feel that the consequences of imagined and recollected blunders (e.g. spilling water over oneself during a public speech) are more negative and embarrassing (Moscovitch, Rodebaugh, & Hesch, 2012). Depressive symptoms and clinician-diagnosed depression are correlated with negative interpretation bias for ambiguous events (Berna, Lang, Goodwin, & Holmes, 2011; Orchard, Pass, & Reynolds, 2016; Rohrbacher & Reinecke, 2014). Sensitivity to ambiguity in social contexts can also covary with individual differences in interpersonal orientation and cognitive vulnerabilities to mood and anxiety disorders. People who endorse a higher need to belong perceive more threat when

there is a brief silence in a conversation compared to people who do not endorse a high need to belong (Koudenburg, Postmes, & Gordijn, 2013). Intolerance of uncertainty, a personality trait that is a vulnerability factor for anxiety, is linked to negative appraisals of ambiguous scenarios (Byrne, Hunt, & Chang, 2015; Carleton, 2016; Oglesby, Raines, Short, Capron, & Schmidt, 2016).

In the present research, we examine whether, and under what circumstances, people who are more socially hypersensitive view themselves more negatively following different kinds of imagined social feedback in a conversation. In the following sections, we describe previous research and theorizing that supports our prediction that people who are especially sensitive to social feedback likely experience ambiguous social information differently from those who are less sensitive.

1.1. Social hypersensitivity, self-esteem, and depression

Social hypersensitivity (called sociotropy in the clinical literature) is characterized by excessive concern for maintaining positive social interactions and self-esteem that is contingent on social feedback (Beck, 1983). Individuals who are socially hypersensitive are overly concerned with how others think of them, have a strong desire to please other people, and depend on others for support (Robins et al., 1994). For example, more socially hypersensitive individuals, compared to less socially hypersensitive individuals, say that they have difficulty ending unhappy relationships, that they have trouble saying "no" to others' requests, and that they are worried about receiving criticism from others (Beck, 1983). Social hypersensitivity is considered a stable personality characteristic: in longitudinal studies, social hypersensitivity scales have shown good test-retest reliabilities (Cikara & Girgus, 2010; Hammen, Ellicott, & Gitlin, 1989; Robins et al., 1994).

Social hypersensitivity was originally conceptualized as a personality characteristic that confers vulnerability for depression (Beck, 1983), and studies have consistently shown that social hypersensitivity has a reliable positive, moderate correlation of $r = 0.30$–0.40 with both depressive symptoms and clinically diagnosed major depressive disorder (Coyne & Whiffen, 1995; for a review, see Girgus & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2006). Researchers have hypothesized that this vulnerability for depression operates through a diathesis-stress model whereby individuals with a personality diathesis (e.g. social hypersensitivity) are at greater risk of developing depressive symptoms when experiencing stressful life events. A body of longitudinal research has supported this model, demonstrating that social hypersensitivity interacts with negative events to predict depressive symptoms (Clark, Beck, & Brown, 1992; Dasch, Cohen, Sahl, & Gunthert, 2008; Hammen, Ellicott, Gitlin, & Jamison, 1989; Mongrain & Zuroff, 1994; Robins, 1990; Robins & Block, 1988).

Self-esteem refers to individuals' evaluations of their self-worth or self-regard on a continuum from positive to negative feelings (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Low self-esteem has been consistently and strongly associated with depression (Orth, Robins, Trzesniewski, Maes, & Schmitt, 2009; Watson, Suls, & Haig, 2002). Recent research has focused on the lability of self-esteem or the degree to which self-esteem fluctuates within an individual over time. The tendency for self-esteem to fluctuate, depending on the type of feedback received, is correlated with negative outcomes. People with highly labile self-esteem have self-worth that is highly sensitive and reactive to daily experiences, and generally experience decreased trait self-esteem and more depressive symptoms over time (Butler, Hokanson, & Flynn, 1994; Kernis, Grannemann, & Mathis, 1991).

State and trait self-esteem are negatively correlated with social hypersensitivity, and this relationship is moderated by the presence of stressors (Dasch et al., 2008; Ewart, Jorgensen, & Kolodner, 1998; Frewen & Dozois, 2006). In a daily diary study over the course of a month, all participants reported decreased self-esteem on days when they experienced more negative events but more socially hypersensitive

individuals – as compared to less socially hypersensitive individuals – also experienced decreased self-esteem on days with an absence of positive events (Cikara & Girgus, 2010). These findings suggest that reactions to the *absence* of positive feedback might provide one mechanism whereby social hypersensitivity confers vulnerability to depression.

1.2. Ambiguous feedback and awkward pauses in conversations

Social feedback in everyday life often eludes clean categorization as explicitly positive or negative. There are numerous instances in daily life that exemplify ambiguous feedback, defined as feedback that is neither explicitly positive nor negative (Leary et al., 1998; Pearson et al., 2008). Some examples of everyday events that are ambiguous include receiving mixed positive and negative feedback on work, receiving a lukewarm evaluation, or attending a social gathering that is uncomfortable or stilted. Ambiguous feedback might also be characterized by the absence of explicit feedback – for example, making a joke among friends that is met with an awkward pause, passing an acquaintance on the street who does not return a greeting, or waiting for the outcome of an interview or job application.

It has been proposed that awkward pauses in conversations should be considered ambiguous signals because they do not explicitly convey positive or negative feedback (Gudykunst & Shapiro, 1996; Pearson et al., 2008). Some evidence suggests that conversations with pauses are less pleasant than flowing conversations. In a study on dyadic communication, participants rated their partners as less competent communicators when the transcripts of their conversations contained more pauses (McLaughlin & Cody, 1982). Pearson et al. (2008) examined the effect of ambiguous signals in interracial dyadic conversations by experimentally manipulating real time conversations to include delays in verbal feedback and measuring subsequent effects on feelings of anxiety and desire to engage in future interactions. Compared to uninterrupted conversations, audiovisual pauses in interracial interactions resulted in more negative interpretations of the conversation, greater anxiety about the interaction, and decreased interest in future contact with the interaction partner (Pearson et al., 2008).

Two experiments in the Netherlands also examined the effects of brief pauses in conversations on how people feel about themselves and their social interactions. In their first experiment, Koudenburg, Postmes, and Gordijn (2011) instructed participants to read a conversation script in which the character with whom they were told to identify made a controversial statement in the course of the group conversation. Participants were assigned to read either a scenario with a brief pause in the conversation after the controversial statement or the exact same scenario with a conversation that flowed without a break after the controversial statement. Participants in the brief pause condition felt less perceived consensus in the group, decreased belongingness, less social validation, more negative emotions, lower self-esteem, and more rejection, as compared to participants who read the same conversation when it flowed without disruption (Koudenburg et al., 2011). In the second experiment, they replicated the effect of the brief pause using a videotaped recording of a group conversation with similar pause and flow conditions. These experiments demonstrate that imagining or experiencing a brief pause in a conversation after a controversial statement is experienced as more negative than imagining or experiencing the same conversation when it flows without disruption.

In the first two experiments in this paper, we examine whether social hypersensitivity interacts with ambiguous feedback to predict negative reactions such as lower self-esteem. An ambiguous moment, such as a brief pause after a controversial statement, should have greater consequences for people who are more preoccupied with figuring out what others are thinking of them than for people who are less preoccupied with this concern. Sensitivity to social glitches and a drive to correct them are important general human characteristics that facilitate group cohesion and relationship-building (Baumeister & Leary,