



The effects of social anxiety on interpersonal evaluations of warmth and dominance



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ABSTRACT

Social anxiety disorder is associated with interpersonal dysfunction, but it is not clear why people with the disorder feel unsatisfied with their relationships. One possibility is that higher social anxiety could lead to changes in sensitivity to interpersonal traits. We examined whether social anxiety moderates the types of interpersonal evaluations people make regarding warmth and dominance. We developed vignettes in which central characters systematically varied in dominance and warmth and asked two samples of participants (undergraduate students, $n = 176$, and online workers, $n = 403$) to rate their willingness to interact with, and the social desirability of, these characters. Participants in general reported stronger desire to interact with warmer and less dominant characters, and rated warmer and more dominant characters as being more socially desirable. People with higher social anxiety exhibited greater tolerance for colder and more submissive characters on both rated dimensions. The perceived similarity of the characters accounted for the bulk of these effects. Participants indicated a higher desire to interact with characters more similar to themselves, and people with higher social anxiety were more likely to rate submissive and cold characters as being like themselves. The results have implications for clinical interventions for social anxiety disorder.

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1. Introduction

Interpersonal dysfunction has been described as a core feature of social anxiety disorder (SAD), such that interpersonal data may provide key insights into the disorder (e.g., Alden and Taylor, 2010). Multiple studies over decades have shown that SAD leads to self-reports of interpersonal impairment (Aderka et al., 2012; Rodebaugh, 2009; Rodebaugh, Fernandez, & Levinson, 2012; Schneier et al., 1994), and that the relationship between SAD and self-reported impairment in friendships is not better explained by other psychological disorders, demographic characteristics, or subjective impairments in other types of relationships (i.e., family relationships: Rodebaugh, 2009; Rodebaugh et al., 2012). The positive impact of friendships on health status is highlighted within a growing literature indicating that poor social support (often operationalized as quality of friendships) poses a risk for mortal-

ity (Giles, Glonek, Luszcz, & Andrews, 2005; Kroenke, Kubzansky, Schernhammer, Holmes, & Kawachi, 2006). Thus, reducing the barriers that exist for individuals with higher social anxiety in forming meaningful interpersonal connections may be a matter of both quality of life and enhancement of physical health and longevity.

Many studies have investigated a question crucial to this topic: Does social anxiety lead to negative judgments from others, making new relationships less likely to form or be satisfying? The balance of this literature indicates that social anxiety, and SAD, leads to negative judgments from others. Evidence for this contention ranges from the finding that social anxiety is associated with a stereotype of being odd (Fox, Fernandez, Rodebaugh, Menatti, & Weeks, in press) to multiple studies establishing that being high in social anxiety, or having SAD, leads to initially negative judgments when individuals are observed or interacted with in the laboratory (e.g., Creed and Funder, 1998; Voncken and Dijk, 2013). However, several findings contradict a blanket statement that high social anxiety *always* leads to negative judgment. First, participants who are higher in social anxiety typically underestimate the quality of their interactions: Even when social anxiety has an impact on the interaction, a person with higher social anxiety is likely to overestimate this impact (Voncken and Bogels, 2008). Second, the evidence suggests that it is not higher social anxiety itself, but

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rather self-protective behaviors associated with higher social anxiety, that leads to these negative judgments. For example, safety behaviors account for much of the impaired social performance of people with SAD (Rowa et al., 2015), and when individuals with SAD are tasked with reducing self-protective safety behaviors during a conversation, they and their conversation partners perceive the conversation to have gone better (Taylor and Alden, 2010). Voncken and Dijk (2013) found that, even without specific instructions, mere prolonged contact tends to ameliorate negative judgment against people with higher social anxiety, particularly when self-disclosure is high (Voncken and Dijk, 2013). Thus, a person with SAD who maintains social contact long enough, appropriately self-discloses, and does not employ self-protective behaviors may not be judged negatively.

A third point that contradicts the idea that social anxiety always leads to negative judgment emerges from data regarding friendship. The only available evidence suggests that when people with SAD do develop friendships, their friends show no clear tendency to be less happy with the friendship (Rodebaugh et al., 2014). This was true despite the fact that the person with SAD remains likely to express dissatisfaction with the friendship (particularly when the relationship has lasted less than a decade (Rodebaugh et al., 2014)). That is, people with SAD report impairment even when negative judgment from the other parties in the friendship appears not to be a factor.

Thus, taken as a whole, there is some support for the notion that being judged negatively by others contributes to the social difficulties of those struggling with social anxiety. However, the same group of studies suggests that increased self-disclosure and reduction in safety behaviors can overcome this effect, given time. Indeed, some evidence suggests that, at least when paired with another person with higher social anxiety and given specific self-disclosure instructions, people with higher social anxiety can achieve a strong sense of closeness quite quickly: During a short laboratory self-disclosure task, the highest ratings of closeness were associated with dyads in which both partners had higher social anxiety (Kashdan and Wenzel, 2005). A crucial issue in friendship development and quality among people with higher social anxiety may therefore be under what circumstances they are willing to self-disclose, drop safety behaviors, and persist in interactions. That is: Under what circumstances do people with higher social anxiety judge others to be either worth interacting with, or at least safe to get to know? In the current study, we turned our attention to the question of how social anxiety might affect judgments of people with varying characteristics as a first step to determining how social anxiety might lead to dysfunctional decisions regarding who to approach and who to avoid.

To investigate how social anxiety moderates the relationship between warmth and dominance and interpersonal judgments, we adopted an interpersonal circumplex approach (Leary, 1957; Wiggins, 1979). From this perspective, interpersonal behavior is conceptualized as ranging along two theoretically orthogonal dimensions, typically arranged in an axis system. The horizontal axis represents nurturance, love, or affiliation whereas the vertical axis represents status, agency, or dominance (Gurtman, 1993) (cf. Fig. 1 for a representation of the circumplex with data overlaid from this study). Thus, a given interpersonal behavior, or trait-like tendency to such behavior, can be described as involving some level of dominance (versus submissiveness) and warmth (versus coldness). Multiple studies have demonstrated that higher social anxiety and avoidance are associated with tendencies to be more submissive and cold (Horowitz, Alden, Wiggins, & Pincus, 2000; Kachin, Newman, & Pincus, 2001; Rodebaugh, Gianoli, Turkheimer, & Oltmanns, 2010). Further, recent studies have provided initial evidence that people with higher social anxiety judge others differently based on dominance and warmth in comparison with

people lower in social anxiety (Aderka, Haker, Marom, Hermesh, & Gilboa-Schechtman, 2013; Haker, Aderka, Marom, Hermesh, & Gilboa-Schechtman, 2014). Globally, such findings have indicated that people with SAD may be more inclined to make interpersonal judgments based on dominance than warmth. That is, people with SAD may weigh information about dominance in their decision making more so than information regarding warmth. Such findings are consistent with evolutionary theories that suggest that people with SAD may be overly sensitive to information about social rank and dominance and less sensitive to affiliation signals (e.g., Gilbert, 2001).

We developed a series of vignettes describing characters that systematically varied in dominance and warmth. We asked two samples of participants (one undergraduate and one drawn from the community) to read multiple vignettes and rate the extent to which they would like to interact with each of the characters in their day-to-day life and how socially desirable (i.e., possessing positive characteristics, such as intelligence and ambition) each character seemed to them. Using multilevel models, we tested how the characters' levels of dominance (versus submissiveness) and warmth (versus coldness) affected these ratings for the samples as a whole, as well as whether participants' levels of social anxiety moderated these ratings. Our hypotheses were that, (H1) overall, as long established by previous research, people would generally rate warmer individuals as more socially desirable and worth interacting with (Asch, 1946; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Kelley, 1950); (H2) social anxiety would impact the relationship between warmth and other ratings such that warmth would have less of a positive impact for participants with higher social anxiety; (H3) social anxiety would impact the relationship between dominance and other ratings such that dominance would have a more negative impact for people with higher social anxiety.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Two moderately large samples were recruited for the present study. The first consisted of 403 adults in North America (USA and Canada). These participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing internet marketplace, by responding to a study ad which was posted on the website. The participants received \$1.00 in exchange for completing the online study. The second sample was comprised of 176 students at an urban Canadian university who were enrolled in at least one psychology course at the time of study completion. These participants were not selected for participation on any pre-determined criteria, and all of them received a credit towards their psychology course in exchange for participating in the study. All participants in both samples completed the study entirely online through a secure research software service (Qualtrics) and reported that they paid at least moderate attention to the study (see Section 2.5). All participants provided informed consent, and all procedures had received full ethics clearance through an institutional ethics committee. The duration of the study was approximately 40 min. For descriptive characteristics of the study samples, see Table 1.

2.2. Measures

A note about reliability. It is important to note that most of the measures in this study were administered at the within-level (i.e., participants used them to rate vignettes). When items are only administered once to participants, the only reliability of concern is whether they vary together across participants, such that when one item is higher for participant A than participant B, the

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