



Do socially anxious individuals fear embarrassment by close others? Development of the *Fear of Embarrassment by Others Scale*

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ABSTRACT

Social anxiety disorder is characterized by an intense fear of social or performance situations, and a fear of acting in a way that will be humiliating or embarrassing. However, the extent to which socially anxious individuals fear embarrassment due to the behavior of close others remains unknown. The *Fear of Embarrassment by Others Scale* (FEOS) was developed to assess the extent to which individuals with social anxiety fear being embarrassed by others. To assess the psychometric properties of this measure, 162 undergraduate students low or high in social anxiety completed the FEOS, along with additional questionnaires. An exploratory factor analysis suggested a single factor. The measure demonstrates high internal consistency, and is correlated with measures of social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and anxiety sensitivity. Fear of embarrassment by others was not found to be a significant predictor of social anxiety, as compared to anxiety sensitivity and fear of negative evaluation. The FEOS discriminated among participants high and low in social anxiety, as those high in social anxiety scored significantly higher on the measure than did participants low in social anxiety. The utility of this scale for research and clinical practice is discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is defined by a marked and persistent fear of social or performance situations in which an individual fears acting in a way that will be embarrassing or humiliating (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Although it is well-established that individuals with SAD fear embarrassing themselves, the extent to which these individuals fear being embarrassed by the behavior of close others is unknown.

Embarrassment is defined as “a self-conscious emotion in which a person feels awkward or flustered in other people’s company or because of the attention of others, as, for example, when being observed engaging in actions that are subject to mild disapproval from others” (VandenBos, 2006, p. 323). Several competing models of why embarrassment occurs have been put forth; however the model that has received the most empirical support is the Social Evaluation Model (Miller, 1995), which proposes that embarrassment occurs due to the anticipation of negative evaluation from others that would threaten how the individual wished to portray him or herself (Miller, 1995). Accordingly, perceived negative social evaluation has been found to be the best predictor of embarrassment (Miller, 1995), and it significantly correlates with existing measures of embarrassment.

Currently, three measures of embarrassment exist in the literature. The *Embarrassability Scale* (Modigliani, 1968) is a 26-item, self-report questionnaire that describes potentially embarrassing situations. Responses are made based on how embarrassed the respondent would feel in the situation. Kelly and Jones (1997) developed a second measure, the *Susceptibility to Embarrassment Scale*, which consists of 25 items that measure the degree to which respondents agree with trait-based statements about unpleasant interpersonal exposure leading to a perceived loss in public esteem. Sabini, Siepmann, Stein, and Meyerowitz (2000) developed 40 embarrassment scenarios, and factor analysis indicated three subscales: (1) faux pas (engaging in a social blunder or failure), (2) being in the center of attention, and (3) sticky situations (being placed in an uncomfortable social interaction, such as asking someone to repay an overdue loan). Although these measures of embarrassment due to one’s own actions are available, there are currently no measures assessing embarrassment due to the behaviors of close others.

1.1. Previous research examining embarrassment by others

There is limited literature on the experience of embarrassment due to the behavior of close others, and no studies were found that examined this phenomenon specifically in social anxiety. Miller (1987) postulated that observing another person’s behavior can be embarrassing, either because the person’s actions reflect on oneself or because one feels empathic embarrassment. Thornton (2003) conducted a study in which dating partners watched a vi-

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deo recording of a couple dancing, with one partner dancing in an embarrassing manner. Participants were instructed to pretend to be that couple and rate how embarrassed they would be of their partner. They rated that they would have been mildly embarrassed by their partner, with women being more embarrassed than men. The men who scored higher on a fear of negative evaluation measure reported greater embarrassment; however, fear of negative evaluation did not predict embarrassment ratings for women.

Fortune and Newby-Clark (2008) conducted several studies that examined the “guilty by association effect,” which is when an individual (whom they termed an “associate”) believes he or she will be negatively evaluated by others due to his or her relationship with an undesirable person (whom they termed an “offender”). It was found that participants believed that they would be rated more negatively by an observer if a friend or acquaintance performed a socially inappropriate behavior, specifically nose-picking in public or academic dishonesty. However, participants were mistaken in this belief, as the observers did not rate the associate more negatively due to the offender’s actions. Although these studies did not use embarrassment as a main outcome measure, they revealed that individuals erroneously believe that observers will rate them more negatively if they are associated with someone who commits a socially unacceptable behavior. These anticipated negative ratings were associated with increased embarrassment, which was attenuated when participants were encouraged to perceive the situation through the eyes of an observer.

It is likely that the construct of embarrassment plays a significant role in individuals with SAD. As mentioned previously, a core feature of SAD is fear of embarrassing oneself, however no studies have examined whether these individuals also fear being embarrassed by the behavior of close others. It would be important to assess whether individuals with SAD have a fear of embarrassment by others and if so, how it impacts their relationships. If it is found to have a negative impact on their relationships, it may be helpful to address fear of embarrassment by others in treatment.

1.2. Current study

The research aims of the present study were as follows: (1) develop and assess the psychometric properties of the *Fear of Embarrassment by Others Scale* (FEOS), (2) examine the extent to which fear of embarrassment by others is distinct from other processes associated with social anxiety (e.g., anxiety sensitivity and fear of negative evaluation), (3) determine whether fear of embarrassment is a significant predictor of social anxiety as compared to other processes associated with social anxiety (e.g., anxiety sensitivity and fear of negative evaluation), and (4) establish the extent to which individuals high in social anxiety fear embarrassment by close others as compared to individuals low in social anxiety.

It was hypothesized that fear of embarrassment by others would be a distinct but overlapping construct with social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and anxiety sensitivity. It was also hypothesized that fear of embarrassment by others would be a significant predictor of social anxiety along with anxiety sensitivity and fear of negative evaluation. Finally, it was hypothesized that individuals high in social anxiety would score significantly higher on the construct of fear of embarrassment by others, as measured by the FEOS, in comparison to individuals low in social anxiety.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from Ryerson University’s undergraduate participant pool, as well as from the Greater Toronto Area

community. Prescreening data were collected from 1462 undergraduate students who completed the *Social Interaction Anxiety Scale* (SIAS; Mattick & Clarke, 1998), among other measures. To establish cutoff scores, the bottom and top quartiles of the total scores of the SIAS were used. Participants were considered to be low in social anxiety if they had a score of 14 or below, and considered to be high in social anxiety if they had a score of 33 or above. These cutoff scores were then used to recruit undergraduate students and individuals from the community who were low ($n = 80$) or high ($n = 82$) in social anxiety.

The demographic variables for the sample were as follows: 82.0% of participants were female, and participant ages ranged from 17 to 63 years ($M = 24.03$, $SD = 9.84$). The sample self-identified as White/European (48.8%), Asian (30.6%), or Other (20.6%). Of the total sample, 0% of those in the low social anxiety group and 51.2% of those in the high social anxiety group reported symptoms meeting criteria for SAD according to the text revision of the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Diagnoses were established with the social phobia section of the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV (SCID-I; First, Spitzer, Gibbon, & Williams, 1996).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Fear of Embarrassment by Others Scale (FEOS; developed for use in this study)

The FEOS is a 10-item, self-report questionnaire that measures the extent to which individuals fear being embarrassed by the behavior of close others (see [Supplementary Material: Appendix](#)). The items were rationally-generated, and include questions such as, “When I am with others, I worry they will do something that I will find humiliating,” “I am easily embarrassed by the behavior of others,” and “I avoid spending time in public with friends or family who are likely to do something embarrassing.” Responses are made on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 4 (*extremely characteristic of me*).

2.2.2. Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS; Mattick & Clarke, 1998)

The SIAS is a 20-item, self-report questionnaire that measures anxiety in situations involving social interaction. Responses are made on a 5-point Likert scale, with options ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*). The SIAS demonstrates strong internal consistency and can discriminate individuals with social anxiety from those with other anxiety disorders (Brown et al., 1997; Mattick & Clarke, 1998).

2.2.3. Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN; Connor et al., 2000)

The SPIN is a 17-item, self-report measure that assesses the extent to which respondents fear social interactions, criticism, and showing signs of anxiety. Responses are made on a 5-point Likert scale, with answers ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*). The SPIN has demonstrated good validity and reliability (Antony, Coons, McCabe, Ashbaugh, & Swinson, 2006; Connor et al., 2000).

2.2.4. Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation-II (BFNE-II; Leary, 1983)

The BFNE-II is a 12-item, self-report questionnaire that measures the extent to which individuals worry about other people judging them negatively. Participants respond to each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*extremely characteristic of me*). The BFNE-II has demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .97$), as well as both convergent and discriminant validity (Carleton, Collimore, & Asmundson, 2007).

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