Self-concept certainty in social phobia

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Abstract

Two studies are reported which examined the content of beliefs about self-attributes in social phobia, and the level of certainty with which these beliefs are held. The results of both studies indicated that individuals with social phobia held less positive beliefs about their personality characteristics in comparison to non-anxious individuals. In addition, social anxiety was associated with reduced subjective confidence in self-descriptiveness ratings for personality attributes (Study 1), as well as longer reaction times in making self-descriptiveness decisions relative to general decisions about trait adjectives (Study 2). The association between social anxiety and reduced certainty in negative attribute ratings was evident after controlling for depression, general anxiety, stress, and the extent to which negative attributes were endorsed as being self-descriptive. Results are discussed in terms of the potential role that reduced self-concept certainty may play in social phobia.
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Introduction

Recent cognitive theories of social phobia propose that negative self-evaluative thought processes during social situations play an important role in the development and maintenance of the disorder (e.g. Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Such theories are supported by a large number of studies showing that socially anxious individuals report a higher frequency of

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negative self-statements during social situations in comparison to non-anxious controls (e.g. Beidel, Turner, & Dancu, 1985; Cacioppo, Glass, & Merluzzi, 1979; Glass, Merluzzi, Biever, & Larsen, 1982; Stopa & Clark, 1993), more negative mental images of themselves as they appear to other people (Hackmann, Surawy, & Clark, 1998), and more negatively biased subjective judgments of their social performances relative to observer ratings (e.g. Alden & Wallace, 1995; Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993). Similarly, evidence has shown that socially anxious individuals are more likely than non-anxious controls to make self-blaming attributions for the causes of negative social events (e.g. Anderson & Arnoult, 1985; Arkin, Appelman, & Burger, 1980; Teglasi & Hoffman, 1982), and to interpret such events to mean that they possess undesirable personality characteristics (Stopa & Clark, 2000; Wilson & Rapee, 2005a, in press). Reductions during treatment in the extent to which individuals believe that negative social events are indicative of negative self-characteristics have also been found to predict longer-term outcome in social phobia (Wilson & Rapee, 2005b), further supporting the view that negative self-related judgments may be an important factor underlying anxiety in social situations.

As suggested by several authors, it may be the case that negative self-evaluative cognitions during social situations at least partially reflect more negative underlying views of the self among socially anxious individuals compared to non-anxious individuals (e.g. Alden, Mellings, & Ryder, 2001; Clark & Wells, 1995). For instance, according to the theoretical model by Clark and Wells (1995), individuals with social phobia may hold generalised maladaptive assumptions about themselves (such as the belief that they are inadequate), which become activated during situations in which they may potentially be evaluated by other people. Consistent with the notion that socially anxious individuals hold more negative underlying views of the self compared to non-anxious individuals is evidence showing that shyness and social anxiety are associated with lower scores on measures of general self-esteem (e.g. Cheek, Melchior, & Carpentieri, 1986; Jones, Briggs, & Smith, 1986; Kocovski & Endler, 2000), and that socially anxious individuals rate words denoting positive personality traits as less self-descriptive, and words denoting negative personality traits as more self-descriptive, compared to non-anxious controls (e.g. Mansell & Clark, 1999). In addition, research suggests that unfavourable biases in self-perceptions among socially anxious individuals apply to a range of self-concept dimensions, with evidence showing that shyness is negatively associated with self-ratings of attributes such as likeability, intelligence, and physical attractiveness, even though objective indices of these attributes show no association with scores on shyness measures (e.g. see Cheek et al., 1986; Jones et al., 1986; Montgomery, Haemmerlie, & Edwards, 1991; Paulhus & Morgan, 1997).

Notwithstanding evidence indicating that socially anxious individuals may hold less positive underlying beliefs about the self in comparison to non-anxious individuals, there is some research suggesting that such beliefs are not highly negative, and do not influence self-related judgments in non-social situations. For instance, studies that have examined self-ratings of personal attributes among socially anxious individuals have shown that they do not strongly endorse negative characteristics as being self-descriptive, or strongly reject positive attributes as being self-descriptive, but instead give ratings for each type of attribute that are more moderate than those of non-anxious individuals (e.g. see Mansell & Clark, 1999). In addition, research has indicated that the tendency of socially anxious people to attribute failure outcomes to personal attributes is specific to social situations, as opposed to events of a non-interpersonal nature (e.g. Anderson & Arnoult, 1985; Teglasi & Hoffman, 1982; see also Wilson & Rapee, in press).