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An investigation into the lower peer liking of anxious than nonanxious children

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A B S T R A C T

Peer dislike of anxious behaviour was investigated in 7–12 year olds. Child actors delivered an identical verbal presentation: once in an anxious manner and once confidently. The videos were rated for liking and seven potential mediators by three groups of children: 32 anxiety-disordered peers with social phobia; 16 anxiety-disordered peers without social phobia; and 48 nonclinical peers. A mediation model with moderation effects was tested within a within-subjects framework. "Anxious" actors were liked significantly less than "confident" actors. This effect differed by group rater, in that relative dislike of the anxious actor was significantly greater for the nonclinical than socially phobic raters. Physical attractiveness and friend acceptance mediated the effect for all group raters. Other identified mediators differed depending upon the group rater. The findings direct future efforts to help anxiety-disordered children circumvent an increased risk of negative peer relations, and testify to consideration of the rater in sociometric studies.

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1. Introduction

Anxious children are less well-liked than their non-anxious counterparts (see Kingery, Erdley, Marshall, Whitaker, & Reuter, 2010 for a review). Moreover, this negative judgement can be made within just 1 or 2 min of observing the anxious child (Barrow, Baker, & Hudson, 2011; Verduin & Kendall, 2008). Successful childhood peer relations are an invaluable protective factor in development (e.g. Bukowski, Laursen, & Hoza, 2010). Negative first impressions are pervading and enduring (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Better understanding of these rapid negative judgements of anxious children could provide a foundation on which to intervene to improve the negative peer experiences of anxious children (Hymel, 1986).

The lower peer liking of anxious children has been demonstrated in two separate studies of similar design. Children with or without an anxiety disorder (aged 8–9 or 9–13 years) were asked to give a speech (Barrow et al., 2011; Verduin & Kendall, 2008). The speeches were rated by unfamiliar peers for state anxiety and how much they liked the child. In both studies the results were consistent in

that based purely on these 1–2 min speeches, children perceived as anxious by their peers were disliked more than those children who were not perceived to be anxious (Barrow et al., 2011; Verduin & Kendall, 2008). Thus, something about being perceived to be anxious makes a child less likeable – a finding that has been endorsed with anxious adults also (e.g. Papsdorf & Alden, 1998). There are a number of factors that could potentially explain the relationship between perceived anxiety and dislike. Research into dislike points to at least six factors that could mediate this relationship including perceived physical attractiveness, self-disclosure – giving and receiving, perceived similarity to another, perceived reciprocation of liking, the perceived attitude of one's peer group, and the social discomfort that an anxious individual can evoke. The present study set out to determine whether the relationship between perceived anxiety and lower peer liking might be mediated by one of these six factors, and the reasoning for each is described briefly in turn.

First, the strongest evidence for a potential mediator of the relationship between perceived anxiety and lower peer liking was physical attractiveness, or the perception of the physical traits of an individual as being aesthetically pleasing or beautiful. In the study of 8–9 year olds who were observed by unfamiliar peers performing a speech, children with anxiety disorders were judged to be less physically attractive by their peers than those without anxiety disorders (Barrow et al., 2011). Similarly, in a meta-analytical review of 93 studies, albeit primarily of college students,

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attractiveness was found to be negatively correlated with social anxiety across a variety of designs (e.g. photos or face-to-face) and measures (Feingold, 1992). This is significant, in that attractive individuals consistently receive more positive appraisals than less attractive individuals. For example, in a study of 3183 students from grades 2–10, physical attractiveness was associated with peer acceptance over and above athleticism, academic performance and multiple dimensions of social behaviour (Vannatta, Gartstein, Zeller, & Noll, 2009). Anxious children are perceived as less attractive and attractiveness is linked to higher liking; is it possible that perceptions of physical attractiveness might explain some of the negative association between perceived anxiety and likeability?

A similar deduction could be applied to the concept of self-disclosure. Adults who disclose less personal information about oneself to another are typically less liked (e.g. Collins & Miller, 1994). In indirect support of this statement with children – with the knowledge that emotion words often distinguish intimate from non-intimate disclosures (Jourard, 1971) – pre-schoolers who used a larger number of different emotion words, made more references to others' emotional states, and used emotion vocabulary for social functions in naturally occurring interactions were liked more by peers than those children who did not (Fabes, Eisenberg, Hanish, & Spinrad, 2001). Shy/withdrawn children have been found to report lower intimate disclosures in their friendships than normative children (Rubin, Wojslawowicz, Rose-Krasnor, Booth-LaForce, & Burgess, 2006). Indeed, by definition, children with social phobia are typically reticent in social and conversational situations (APA, 1994); a theory substantiated by a study in which children with social phobia were found to speak a lower mean number of words in response to prompts from peers than control children (Spence, Donovan, & Brechman-Toussaint, 1999). Anxious children may disclose less than non-anxious children and be less well-liked by their peers as a consequence.

Perceptions of similarity may also go some way to explain the lower likeability of anxious children. In a conversational paradigm study with female undergraduates, overt signs of anxiety predicted perceived similarity; in that the more overtly anxious a participant was the lower confederates' perceptions of similarity were between themselves and the participant, independent of the confederates' own anxiety (Papsdorf & Alden, 1998). Anxiety also negatively predicted liking, but when perceived similarity was controlled for, the impact of anxiety on liking decreased, in other words, perceived similarity was found to mediate the relationship between anxiety and lower liking (Papsdorf & Alden, 1998). This finding has yet to be replicated in the child literature, but it lends itself to the feasible suggestion that children's anxious behaviour may convey feelings of dissimilarity which in turn prompts a greater peer dislike.

The anticipation that liking will be reciprocated may also influence liking (e.g. Curtis & Miller, 1986). The stronger one believes that they are capable of performing a behaviour to attain a certain goal, the more likely one will execute it (Bandura, 1993). If individuals feel that they may be liked back, this might increase perceptions of peer liking with a view towards friendship. The reverse process has been demonstrated in that rejected children were able to make favourable impressions on unfamiliar peers if told in advance that the peers were going to like them (Rabiner & Coie, 1989). Anxious children have been reported to come across as less warm or friendly (Inderbitzen, Walters, & Bukowski, 1997); such a demeanour, could reduce peers' perception of a possible reciprocated friendship and manifest in reduced liking of the anxious child.

Other people's perception of an individual may also influence ones liking of someone. Relationships, including friendships, have been identified as one way in which individuals naturally categorise social information; with the consequence that attributes associated with one partner may also be attributed to the other (Kernis & Wheeler, 1981). Children as young as five can be perceptive to this categorisation, at least regards peer status (Nesdale & Flesser, 2001), and recognise that a friend's status will influence their own peer standing (Eder, 1985). In qualitative interviews with middle-school girls, a typical comment was identified as "...you hang around popular kids and you usually become popular" (Eder, 1985, p. 158). Indeed, when a neglected child was paired with a popular child, the status of the neglected child improved relative to control children not paired with a child (Morris, Messer, & Gross, 1995). Peers are perceptive to anxious behaviour (Younger, Schwartzman, & Ledingham, 1985) and how it might deviate from the peer group norm (Wright, Giammarino, & Parad, 1986). Together with the report that children are motivated to gain higher social standing (Nesdale & Flesser, 2001), anxious children may be less well-liked because their peers are aware that it may affect their popularity or status.

The last factor identified as a potential mediator of the relationship between anxious behaviour and lower liking, may be because of the uncomfortable feeling or discomfort that anxious behaviour can evoke. For example, in a conversation paradigm, adults with social phobia were found to elicit negative emotions in others, such as "uncomfortable", embarrassed for", or "bored", which in turn were associated with a lower liking (Voncken, Alden, Bogels, & Roelofs, 2008). Again it is feasible to suggest that this finding may extend to children, in that the reason anxious children are liked less is because they elicit feelings of discomfort in the peer. Clearly, the proposed mediators are all very exploratory in nature, yet research must start somewhere, and finding out why anxious children are less liked than non-anxious children is an important task for developmental and clinical researchers.

One factor that is often neglected in these sociometric studies is the consideration of the rater, or the individual performing the judgement. The focus is nearly always on the characteristics of the anxious child as the chief influence on peer liking. Yet, this is inherently one-dimensional. Just as characteristics of the target child might influence liking, so might characteristics of the peer and/or the dynamic relationship between the two. For example, in multiple regression analyses on 10–13 year olds reports of social worries and likeability ratings of each other, those with high social worry were liked less than less with low social worry (Zimmer-Gembeck, Waters, & Kindermann, 2010). However, once the similarity between the target child and the perceiver was controlled for, social worry showed no association with peer liking; even youth with very high levels of worry were only marginally less liked than those with less worry (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2010). Thus, the rater is an important consideration in interpersonal evaluation studies, to the effect that consideration of the rater can produce very different results.

Thus, the current study attempted to manipulate this by purposefully creating three different groups of raters. Videos of child actors trained to deliver exactly the same verbal presentation, once in a confident manner, and once in an anxious manner, were presented to clinically anxious children with social phobia, clinically anxious children without a social phobia diagnosis, and nonclinical children from the community. The children rated the child-actors on likeability and the six possible mediating variables identified. Anxiety was chosen as one aspect of the rater that may impress differential liking of an anxious child and the proposed mediators. For example, in the study of 9–13 year olds who were observed by unfamiliar peers performing a speech, the authors acknowledged that despite the overall negative association between perceived anxiety and peer liking, some raters liked the target children *because* they appeared nervous. Specifically, to the question, "Do you think you would get along with the child on the videotape? Why or why not?"