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Self-focused attention affects subsequent processing of positive (but not negative) performance appraisals



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ABSTRACT

Background and objectives: Cognitive-behavioral models highlight the conjoint roles of self-focused attention (SFA), post-event processing (PEP), and performance appraisals in the maintenance of social anxiety. SFA, PEP, and biased performance appraisals are related to social anxiety; however, limited research has examined how SFA affects information-processing following social events. The current study examined whether SFA affects the relationships between performance appraisals and PEP following a social event.

Methods: 137 participants with high ($n = 72$) or low ($n = 65$) social anxiety were randomly assigned to conditions of high SFA or low SFA while engaging in a standardized social performance. Subsequent performance appraisals and PEP were measured.

Results: Immediate performance appraisals were not affected by SFA. High levels of SFA led to a stronger, inverse relationship between immediate positive performance appraisals and subsequent negative PEP. High levels of SFA also led to a stronger, inverse relationship between negative PEP and changes in positive performance appraisals.

Limitations: Future research should examine whether the current findings, which involved a standardized social performance event, extend to interaction events as well as in a clinical sample.

Conclusions: These findings suggest that SFA affects the processing of positive information following a social performance event. SFA is particularly important for understanding how negative PEP undermines positive performance appraisals.

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1. Introduction

Social anxiety—characterized by persistent fear of negative evaluation in social situations—often involves biased information-processing that maintains heightened levels of anxiety. Cognitive-behavioral models propose that the conjoint influence of several mechanisms, including self-focused attention, biased performance appraisals, and post-event processing, likely accounts for the persistence of social anxiety (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

Self-focused attention (SFA)—the process of directing attention to one's own behavior, physiology, and cognitions (e.g., self-image)—occurs during a feared social event and leads socially anxious individuals to more thoroughly encode internal cues (Clark & Wells,

1995). This attentional process is believed to influence subjective performance appraisals, which typically are biased for socially anxious individuals (Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993). Biased performance appraisals are believed to lead to post-event processing (PEP); a meticulous review of performance appraisals that is ruminative and negatively valenced (Kocovski, Endler, Rector, & Flett, 2005). PEP following increased SFA is considered particularly problematic because greater accessibility to internal cues, due to SFA, likely helps PEP strengthen biased performance appraisals. Although studies exist demonstrating that SFA and PEP are related to social anxiety (Brozovich & Heimberg, 2008; Schultz & Heimberg, 2008), no study has examined the conjoint influence of these cognitive processes on performance appraisals over an extended period.

1.1. Self-focused attention and performance appraisals

There is mixed evidence regarding the relation between SFA and

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performance appraisals. Several studies have demonstrated that a significant inverse association exists such that heightened levels of SFA are related to poorer perceptions of performance (Daly, Vangelisti, & Lawrence, 1989; Mellings & Alden, 2000) and higher levels of perceived anxious appearance (Mansell & Clark, 1999). Although SFA and performance appraisals appear associated, experimental studies have not demonstrated such a relation. Woody (1996) manipulated SFA in socially anxious individuals, but did not find a significant effect on perceived performance. These null results were replicated across high and low levels of social anxiety (Woody & Rodriguez, 2000). Previous experimental studies are limited due to the lack of measurement that may be sensitive to the effect of SFA on performance appraisals over time, especially considering the relation between SFA and PEP.

1.2. Self-focused attention and post-event processing

Clark and Wells (1995) proposed that information encoded during SFA influences engagement in PEP. Recently, several studies have found evidence to support this prediction. Makkar and Grisham (2011a) found a significant, moderate relation between SFA and PEP across social performance events and social interaction events. In addition, Chen, Rapee, and Abbott (2013) observed a marginally significant indirect link between inappropriate attentional focus (e.g., attention toward physical symptoms) and PEP through immediate performance appraisals.

In another study, Makkar and Grisham (2011b) manipulated self-imagery during a social performance event and found that negative self-imagery produced more PEP than neutral self-imagery. Since both conditions had increased levels of SFA, Gaydukevych and Kocovski (2012) created experimental conditions in which highly socially anxious participants were either highly self-focused or minimally self-focused during a social performance event. The researchers found that high levels of SFA led to increased negative PEP following a speech while positive PEP remained unaffected. Although there is encouraging support that SFA and PEP are associated, there are no experimental studies examining the potential for SFA to affect the relations between performance appraisals and PEP, both immediately and over time.

1.3. Post-event processing and performance appraisals

Clark and Wells (1995) proposed that biased performance appraisals influence engagement in PEP following a social event. There is a well-established link between immediate performance appraisals and negative PEP. Perini, Abbott, & Rapee (2006) found that the relation between social anxiety and negative PEP was statistically mediated by immediate performance appraisals. A significant association between immediate performance appraisals and negative PEP has been observed (Chen et al., 2013) and appears to be strengthened after providing feedback suggesting a moderate level of performance compared to feedback suggesting a high level of performance (Zou & Abbott, 2012). It is evident that immediate performance appraisals are related to subsequent engagement in negative PEP.

There is also evidence suggesting that negative PEP predicts change in performance appraisals. Socially anxious individuals often exhibit a bias towards recalling negative self-related information (Edwards, Rapee, & Franklin, 2003), which is predicted by negative PEP (Mellings & Alden, 2000; Rapee & Abbott, 2007). Negative PEP has been observed to predict changes in performance appraisals for high socially anxious individuals following social performance events (Abbott & Rapee, 2004) and social interaction events (Dannahy & Stopa, 2007). Although these studies provide compelling evidence that immediate performance appraisals,

negative PEP, and changes in performance appraisals are interrelated, they do not explicitly address the role of SFA. In addition, these studies do not address whether changes in performance appraisals depend on valence (i.e., positive and negative), although previous research suggests that high socially anxious individuals seem to update and remember self-relevant information differently based on valence (Segal, Kessler, & Anholt, 2015; Zengel, Skowronski, Valentiner, & Sedikides, 2015). Therefore, the current study investigated whether SFA affects the relations between negative PEP and both positive and negative performance appraisals across high and low levels of social anxiety.

1.4. The current study

The current study sought to address gaps in the extant literature related to SFA, PEP, and performance appraisals. Clark and Wells' (1995) model suggests that SFA would affect both immediate performance appraisals and the course of performance appraisals. To address whether SFA affects performance appraisals, SFA was manipulated during a social performance event in a sample of high socially anxious individuals and low socially anxious individuals. Based on theoretical and empirical considerations, immediate performance appraisals were hypothesized to differ as a function of SFA, social anxiety, and the interaction of these variables following a social performance event. In addition, SFA was hypothesized to moderate the relationship between immediate performance appraisals and negative PEP.

It is possible that the effects of biased information-processing mechanisms (i.e., SFA and PEP) on performance appraisals become especially apparent after a period of time for socially anxious individuals. Changes in performance appraisals were hypothesized to be particularly noticeable when socially anxious individuals engaged in increased SFA. That is, SFA was hypothesized to affect the relation between social anxiety and changes in performance appraisals following a social performance event. Since social anxiety is strongly related to PEP and PEP is likely the mechanism that explains changes in performance appraisals, it was hypothesized that the interaction between SFA and negative PEP would account for the interaction between SFA and social anxiety.

Previous research has differentiated between positive performance appraisals and negative performance appraisals (Makkar & Grisham, 2011b). High socially anxious individuals apparently process self-relevant positive, negative, and neutral information differently (Segal et al., 2015; Zengel et al., 2015). However, no study has examined whether SFA or PEP demonstrate different relations depending on the valence of appraisal; therefore this possibility was explored in the current study.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a large Midwestern University were screened ($N = 1751$). Those who scored more than one standard deviation above or below the mean on the Social Phobia Scale—Short Form (SPS-SF; Fergus, Valentiner, McGrath, Gier-Lonsway, & Kim, 2012) were invited to participate (N 's = 231 and 186, respectively). Eighty-three participants with high social anxiety and 54 participants with low social anxiety were recruited. The final sample had a mean age of 20.28 years ($SD = 4.32$) and was primarily female (65.7%), primarily non-Hispanic (90.5%), and primarily white (69.4%). Eighty-two percent of participants with high social anxiety scored above a 34 on the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS; Mattick & Clarke, 1998), indicative of social anxiety disorder (Rodebaugh, Woods, Heimberg,

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