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## Short report

# “Don't put me down but don't be too nice to me either”: Fear of positive vs. negative evaluation and responses to positive vs. negative social-evaluative films



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## ABSTRACT

**Background and objectives:** The bivalent fear of evaluation (BFOE) model suggests that fears of negative evaluation (FNE) and positive evaluation (FPE) are distinct features in social anxiety disorder as well as in non-clinical variations of social anxiety. The constructs can be measured utilizing the *Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale – Revised* (BFNE-R) and the *Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale* (FPES), respectively. Whereas the distinction between FNE and FPE has been well examined in survey studies, concomitant evidence from laboratory tasks is scarce.

**Methods:** The present study tested whether subjective unpleasantness responses to short films simulating positive and negative evaluation from others are related to individual differences in FNE and FPE. Ninety-eight unselected individuals watched 24 short films displaying actors expressing positive, negative and neutral sentences and rated their responses on unpleasantness. Furthermore, pride responses to positive films were examined since these can be expected to discriminate between FPE and FNE.

**Results:** As expected, higher BFNE-R scores were related to more unpleasant responding to negative films, whereas higher FPES scores were related to more unpleasant responding to positive films. Furthermore, experience of pride following positive films correlated positively with BFNE-R, but negatively with FPES scores.

**Limitations:** Participants were university students which limits representativeness.

**Conclusions:** The study revealed that measures of FNE and FPE show *distinct* relationships with positive and negative social feedback which provides further evidence for the BFOE model in a laboratory setting.

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## 1. Introduction

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is associated with severe psychosocial impairments and a high rate of comorbid disorders (Lieb & Müller, 2002). Central for SAD, socially anxious individuals expect to be negatively evaluated by others and feel worse about it

than low socially anxious individuals (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Smith & Sarason, 1975). This so-called *Fear of Negative Evaluation* (FNE) is incorporated as an important cognitive feature of social anxiety in cognitive-behavioral models (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

Weeks, Heimberg, and Rodebaugh (2008) recently added another core feature of social anxiety – *Fear of Positive Evaluation* (FPE) – consisting of distress and feelings of apprehension about others' positive evaluations of oneself. Albeit related, FNE and FPE have been shown in cross-sectional studies and one longitudinal study to contribute *distinctly* to the phenotype of social anxiety (e.g., Fergus et al., 2009; Rodebaugh, Weeks, Gordon, Langer, & Heimberg, 2012; Weeks, Heimberg, & Rodebaugh, 2008; Weeks, Jakatdar, & Heimberg, 2010). Consequently, Weeks and Howell (2012) combined them as unique components in their *bivalent*

**Abbreviations:** BFNE-R, Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale – Revised; BFOE, Bivalent Fear of Evaluation; CESD-R, Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale – Revised; FNE, Fear of Negative Evaluation; FPE, Fear of Positive Evaluation; FPES, Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale; SAD, Social Anxiety Disorder.

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fear of evaluation (BFOE) model. However, the role of FPE as a *distinct* feature remains controversial. Alternative accounts construe FPE as a *delayed* effect of FNE: An initial positive evaluation raises social standards, but if they cannot be upheld, FNE may arise (Wallace & Alden, 1995, 1997).

A distinction between the *distinct* and *delayed* account can be drawn by looking into the goals potentially underlying FPE and FNE: According to Weeks, Rodebaugh, Heimberg, Norton, and Jakatdar (2009), rather than predicting future failures (*delayed* account), FPE serves a more fundamental role in the social hierarchy: positive feedback entails an *upward* shift in social hierarchy resulting in a fear of negative consequences (e.g., concerns of social reprisal from more dominant others due to overstepping one's social rank [e.g., see Weeks & Howell, 2012]), whereas FNE is a fear of negative consequences entailed by a *downward* shift in social hierarchy following negative feedback (e.g., social exclusion). Thus, an additional prediction of the BFOE model is that FPE and FNE may show *distinctiveness* in regard of different goals, relating them differentially to social behaviors that serve to prevent social exclusion on the one hand or conflicts with high-rank group members on the other.

Despite notable evidence for the *distinct* account, questionnaire-based research has important limitations, as personal social experiences, self-concepts and selective memory bias influence ratings. In the laboratory, by contrast, social-evaluative stimuli can be delivered under controlled and comparable conditions, thus limiting between-participant variability and specifying the targeted behaviors. Along these lines, Weeks, Howell, and Goldin (2013) simulated social encounters by using films with actors expressing either negative or positive feedback. Thereby, FPE correlated positively with subjective responses to positive, but not negative feedback, whereas FNE correlated with positive and negative feedback. However, some questions remain. First, neutral films are necessary to exclude generalized response tendencies, frequently reported in socially anxious populations (Cooney, Atlas, Joermann, Eugène, & Gotlib, 2006; Lange, Allart, Keijsers, Rinck, & Becker, 2012). Second, to provide conceptual clarity, orthogonality of the independent (questionnaires to measure FNE and FPE) and the dependent variables (unpleasantness ratings of positive, negative and neutral sentences) is desirable. The *delayed* account would predict large variance overlaps between measures of FNE and FPE as well as between their respective relationships with responses to positive, neutral and negative films whereas we expected to find support for the *distinct* account, predicting unique covariance between FPE and unpleasantness responses to positive films as well as between FNE and unpleasantness responses to negative films.

Furthermore, if FPE and FNE serve differential goals with respect to shifts in the social hierarchy, feelings of *pride* in response to the positive sentences might be informative. Pride communicates success and status to others (Leary, 2007), thereby increasing social status within a group (Tracy & Robins, 2007a) and Gilbert (2000) psychometrically showed that pride is correlated with feelings of superiority to others. In addition, pride is tied to self-esteem (Brown & Marshall, 2001; Tracy & Robins, 2007b), which signals social status (sociometer hypothesis; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Consequently, pride can reflect an individual's position in the social hierarchy. If FPE serves to avoid upward social shifts, it should be *negatively* correlated with pride responses, whereas if FNE serves to avoid downward social shifts, it should be *positively* correlated with pride responses to positive films. In sum, pride responses to positive films might provide a stronger test of the *distinct* account relating FPE and FNE in the opposite direction to the same situation and might be indicative of underlying social hierarchies.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Participants

Ninety-eight University of Salzburg students, mean age 23.5 years ( $SD = 3.55$ ), with no current mental or neurological disorders, participated in exchange for payment (10 Euro) or course credit. Data were acquired in two phases ( $N_1 = 43$ , 37 female;  $N_2 = 55$ , 29 female) with slight variations in stimulus presentation and measures.<sup>1</sup> The study protocol was approved by the University of Salzburg ethics committee.

### 2.2. Procedure

After informed consent and a general introduction, participants completed questionnaires for FNE and FPE. Next, sensors for psychophysiology measures were attached (results not reported here<sup>2</sup>), followed by adaptation and rating training. Generally, in both experimental phases, several negative, positive, and neutral films (3 s each) from *E. vids* (Blechert, Schwitalla, & Wilhelm, 2013), a well validated film-set, were shown, each followed by ratings on visual analogue scales. Each participant in subsample 1 was presented with 8 negative (e.g., "I hate you"), 8 neutral (e.g., "The train goes fast") and 8 positive (e.g., "I am proud of you") sentences expressed by 3 different actors. All negative sentences expressed rejection of participants while all positive sentences were designed to convey appreciation towards the participants. Ten different actors were presented across participants with equal frequency of actor identity and actor gender in each valence category. Actors, in front of a white screen, spoke directly to the camera with corresponding countenance and participants were asked to imagine a real interaction and report their emotional response through the ratings (see Blechert et al., 2013 for detailed information). Phase 1 ratings comprised unpleasantness (*pleasant* to *unpleasant*), arousal (*calming* to *exciting*), pride (*not at all* to *very strong*), and other specific social emotion-related states.<sup>3</sup> Each participant of subsample 2 was presented with the same type and number of films; however, across participants, 18 actors were presented, and ratings were confined to unpleasantness and arousal dimensions. Last, participants completed additional questionnaires and were debriefed.

### 2.3. Questionnaires

#### 2.3.1. Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale – Revised

To measure fear and distress related to negative evaluation from others, a German translation of the *Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale-Revised* (BFNE-R: Carleton, McCreary, Norton, & Asmundson, 2006; Carleton, Collimore, McCabe, & Antony, 2011; German FNE-K: Reichenberger et al., in press) was used. The 12 items (e.g., "I am usually worried about what kind of impression I make") are self-rated on a 5-point Likert-scale from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) – 5 (*extremely characteristic of me*). The sum ranges from 12 to 60, with higher scores indicating greater FNE. The German BFNE-R has demonstrated excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .94$ ), factorial validity, construct validity, and 2-week test-retest reliability (Reichenberger et al., in press).

<sup>1</sup> The two samples exhibited no differences on age, but sample 2 contained a higher proportion of male participants than sample 1 ( $\chi^2 = 12.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ) due to increased efforts to balance gender distribution during recruitment of sample 2. However, correlation patterns did not change according to gender.

<sup>2</sup> EMG and ERP data showed main effects of the valence but no covariation with FNE and FPE.

<sup>3</sup> anger, contempt, fear, guilt, embarrassment, rejection, sadness, joy, appreciation and being liked/loved.

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