

Investigating a critical evaluation tendency in social anxiety[☆]

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Abstract

Models of social phobia suggest that socially anxious individuals have critical evaluation expectancies, expecting others to be inherently critical in their appraisal of performance. One potential source for these expectancies is generalization or projection of an individual's own critical evaluation tendencies. We recruited 89 students, informing them that they would be asked to deliver an impromptu speech. Participants were shown three short pre-recorded speeches and asked to rate the performance of the speaker in each. Participants were also asked to rate how well they thought they would perform. While social anxiety symptoms were correlated with predictions of poorer self-performance, the relationship between social anxiety symptoms and a tendency to more critically appraise the performance of others was only observed for speakers who displayed low levels of anxiety symptoms.

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1. Introduction

Social anxiety disorder is a prevalent, chronic anxiety disorder in which individuals experience excessive, unreasonable anxiety when exposed to social and performance situations

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(American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Keller, 2003). The disorder impacts significantly on an individual's social and occupational functioning (Schneier et al., 1994), as well as their quality-of-life (Hambrick, Turk, Heimberg, Schneier, & Liebowitz, 2003; Lochner et al., 2003). There has been growing research interest (Boschen, *in press*), as well as considerable recent advances in the understanding of the cognitive and behavioural processes involved in the etiology (Rapee & Spence, 2004) and maintenance (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997) of the condition. Despite this, it is known that many individuals treated for social anxiety problems experience incomplete recovery (e.g., Juster & Heimberg, 1995), and therefore that there is room for improvement of our understanding and treatment of the disorder, and the processes thought to underlie it.

One cognitive phenomenon thought to play an important role in social anxiety disorder is the expectancy that others are critical evaluators of performance (Clark & Wells, 1995; Hirsch & Clark, 2004; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). This *Critical Evaluation Expectancy* (CEE) is common to cognitive (e.g., Rapee & Heimberg, 1997), psychodynamic (e.g., Gabbard, 2005), and interpersonal (e.g., Alden & Taylor, 2004) models of social anxiety. Despite its recognition by multiple schools of therapeutic intervention, it is unclear from where these expectancies emerge. Rapee and Spence (2004) outlined a model of the etiology of social anxiety disorder, in which the influence of aversive childhood experiences such as bullying were deemed important in the genesis of cognitive factors such as CEE.

An alternative source for development of CEE is from the individual's own internal experience. Individuals with high levels of social anxiety may expect critical evaluation from others because they themselves have a *Critical Evaluation Tendency* (CET), expecting or demanding a high level of performance from those around them. Psychodynamic models, for instance, may suggest that CEE emerges from an internalised representation of critical others which is then "repeatedly projected onto persons in the environment" (Gabbard, 2005, p. 263). To date, limited research has examined this possibility.

Rapee and Lim (1992) compared evaluations given by socially anxious and non-anxious individuals of performance in a public-speaking task. Participants were assembled in small groups of six to eight participants, and each asked to give an impromptu speech. Participants rated their own speech, as well as the speech of each other group member. Although it was not the primary focus of their study, the researchers reported that there was no difference between socially anxious and non-anxious participants on their ratings of the speech performance of others. This study was laudable in that it assessed evaluations under a condition of increased social anxiety (shortly before or after giving a speech), although this was not uniform across participants. Despite its strengths, the method used by Rapee and Lim (1992) was not designed to assess for a CET in socially anxious participants. The use of different speeches (in different groups) as the source for ratings, rather than a standardised measure is problematic, and was not controlled statistically in this work.

Roth, Antony, and Swinson (2001) examined the interpretations of manifest anxiety symptoms by individuals with social phobia and non-anxious controls. Socially anxious participants were more likely to expect that their manifest anxiety symptoms would be attributed by others to psychiatric conditions or intense anxiety. There were no differences, however, between socially anxious and non-anxious individuals in how they themselves would interpret manifest anxiety in others. Unlike Rapee and Lim (1992), however, the measurement for this study was not conducted under a condition of elevated social anxiety, and therefore was potentially taken in the absence of activation of social anxiety schemas. Taken together, the results of Rapee and Lim (1992) and Roth et al. (2001) suggest that CEE is not associated with CET.

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