



High risk, high reward: Daily perceptions of social challenge and performance in social anxiety disorder



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ABSTRACT

Individuals with Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) have difficulty engaging in social situations because their actions are predicated on minimizing the subjectively biased high potential for rejection. That is, individuals with SAD frequently perceive social situations as challenging, and their performance as subpar. Yet when individuals perceive themselves as succeeding in challenging situations, they typically report these situations as enjoyable and rewarding. This subjective experience of succeeding in a challenging situation has been studied as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; 2000). Thirty-three adults with SAD and 34 matched healthy controls completed a baseline assessment, along with daily and experience sampling entries for 14 days. Results were analyzed using three-level generalized linear mixed effects models, with observations nested within days, nested within participants. Although individuals with and without SAD experienced the same frequency of flow in daily life, social situations led to proportionally *more flow* in participants with SAD than healthy controls. Both results were unexpected, and reasons for them are explored at length. Several experiential variables (positive emotions during and importance ascribed to the event) predicted the probability of flow during each situation. These results offer intervention-relevant suggestions for how individuals may benefit from seeking out challenging situations that offer maximal rewards.

1. Introduction

Patterns of thinking and perceiving limit human experience; a good example may be with people diagnosed with social anxiety disorder (SAD) experiencing flow. Flow occurs when a person perceives he or she is meeting the high demands of an activity with an equally high performance, leading to a rewarding “in the zone” experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; 2000). Individuals with SAD perceive themselves as deficient, perceive social situations as a stage on which they display this deficiency (Clark & Wells, 1995), and avoid potentially rewarding experiences as a way to minimize displaying this deficiency (Kashdan & Steger, 2006). An example illustrates this process:

John and Sarah both started a new job and are at happy hour with their new coworkers and managers for the first time – a potentially challenging social situation. John is preoccupied by trying to appear relaxed, while still being vigilant for any signs that his co-workers do not like him. Sarah, meanwhile, realizes the challenge of the social situation yet focuses on getting to know her coworkers and managers better. Sarah enjoyed herself and thought the happy hour went well; John did not, and this taxing experience may increase the likelihood

that John avoids other taxing but potentially rewarding experiences.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the occurrence of scenarios like this in the everyday lives of people with and without SAD. We argue that individuals with SAD are more likely to take the role of John in everyday scenarios, and social scenarios in particular. To test this argument in the present study, we examine over 2000 ecologically valid observations that can be categorized by 1) the presence/absence of social anxiety disorder in an individual, 2) the presence/absence of a social situation, and 3) the presence/absence of flow. Before examining the data, it is important to briefly expand upon the phenomenology of flow, SAD, and the intersection between the two.

1.1. Phenomenology of flow

Flow experiences occur when an inherently rewarding experience includes the perception of successful performance in a challenging situation (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). The perception of control, absorption, and consistent positive feedback necessary to perceive oneself and performing well in these challenging situations (Keller & Bless, 2008) means flow experiences require a large amount of attention. If these

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attentional demands are met, flow experiences are more likely to occur, and this increased frequency has been associated with two broader benefits to individuals: increased performance and increased hedonic and eudemonic experiences.

First, individuals who report more frequent flow experiences consistently perform better in employment settings, both in terms of satisfaction and in terms of objective work outcomes as rated by superiors (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009), perform better in educational settings as noted by participation and academic outcomes (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Shneider, & Shernoff, 2003), and perform better in various skill-driven sports (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999), among other domains. Perhaps more important to the population in question, however, is that individuals who report more frequent flow events seem to also subjectively judge these experiences and indeed their general life experiences as more positive, which is a valuable and sought after currency for almost all individuals (Diener & Seligman, 2004). Flow experiences themselves are consistently rated as more pleasurable than average experiences (Rogatko, 2009; Delle Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2002). Individuals who report more frequent flow experiences also report higher scores on self-reported measures of satisfaction with life (Asakawa, 2010; Chen, Ye, Chen, & Tung, 2010) and psychological well-being (Steele & Fullagar, 2009). Experientially, individuals who report in-the-moment flow via momentary assessments also look back on these experiences more positively than other experiences, including other positive experiences, over two years later (Freeman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Larson, 1986). More recently, in fact, reporting more frequent flow experiences has been shown to have a moderate association ($r = 0.41$) with increased dopamine receptivity, which is linked to increased positive affect as well as other beneficial processes like increased emotion regulation (de Manzano et al., 2013).

Flow is typically measured as an experience where high perceived challenges are balanced by high perceived skills (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005; Guo & Poole, 2009; Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Pearce, Ainley, & Howard, 2005; Sherry, 2004), though other questionnaires are sometimes used (e.g., Sheldon, Prentice, & Halusic, 2015). The favorability of this measurement approach in the literature has come primarily from 30 years of correlational studies using experience-sampling designs (e.g., Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Bassi, Sartori, & Delle Fave, 2010), but more recent research has also examined flow measurement experimentally (Keller & Bless, 2008). Thus, consistent evidence supports a balance of high perceived skills and high perceived challenges as an appropriate operationalization of flow – in that they are strongly related and causal to most descriptive states of the flow experience.

The majority of flow research, however, examines situations where a single clear goal is present. If other goals are present in a situation, such as maintaining relationships while playing a sport (Bloch, 2008), then flow experiences occur less frequently – presumably because these other goals compete for a person's attention. The cognitive biases of individuals with SAD consistently push other goals to the forefront of their attention (concealing anxiety and avoiding rejection; e.g., Spurr & Stopa, 2002). This is especially true in social situations.

1.2. Phenomenology of SAD

Thirty years of research defines SAD by clear attentional biases that arise from perceived social threats and subsequent behavioral or experiential avoidance of those threats. This disorder is commonly diagnosed (12.1%; Kessler et al., 2005), and impairs individuals in several functional domains (McKnight, Monfort, Kashdan, Blalock, & Calton, 2016). SAD negatively impacts well-being, relationship functioning, and achievements in educational and career domains (Schneier et al., 1994), and contributes to a significant financial burden (Tolman et al., 2009).

Those who suffer from SAD are characterized by an intense, persistent fear of having perceived flaws exposed in social situations,

leading to negative evaluations, and ultimately, rejection (Clark & Wells, 1995; Heimberg, Brozovich, & Rapee, 2010; Morrison & Heimberg, 2013; Moscovitch, 2009). This intense and persistent fear fosters constant self-focused and self-critical attention (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Spurr & Stopa, 2002), and constant threat-focused attention (Mogg, Philippot, & Bradley, 2004) that impairs these individuals' ability to attend to rewarding social experiences (Kashdan, Weeks, & Savostyanova, 2011).

1.3. Phenomenology of SAD is antagonistic to the phenomenology of flow

1.3.1. Generally diminished flow: experiential avoidance

An unwillingness to tolerate anxiety in SAD also leads to maladaptive attempts to avoid or suppress these experiences, further decreasing the opportunities for rewarding social experiences, as well as rewarding experiences more generally (Kashdan & Steger, 2006). This cycle maintains social anxiety, and leads to perceptions of poor social performance (Hopko, McNeil, Zvolensky, & Eifert, 2002), which induces exhaustive efforts of experiential avoidance that limit reward-seeking behavior and reduce overall general positive experiences (Kashdan & Collins, 2010; Kashdan et al., 2011). Flow experiences are defined as positive and rewarding, yet effortful (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Keller & Bless, 2008). Therefore the phenomenology of SAD produces experiential avoidance that is antagonistic to general flow experiences.

1.3.2. Diminished flow in social situations: biased attention and judgment

If socially anxious individuals cannot perceive positive feedback (e.g., Wallace & Alden, 1997; Weeks, Heimberg, & Rodebaugh, 2008), or have negatively biased judgments about their interpersonal performance (Taylor & Alden, 2010), then they have no evidence contradicting their perceptions of themselves as deficient and social situations as threatening. Thus, individuals with SAD naturally perceive social situations as challenging – one prerequisite for the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Unfortunately, the biased judgment and attentional demands of individuals with SAD preclude them from perceiving skilled performance in these social situations (e.g., Alden & Wallace, 1995) – the other prerequisite for the flow experience. Therefore the phenomenology of SAD produces biases that are particularly antagonistic for social flow experiences.

1.4. The present study

Taken together, the defining characteristics of SAD produce a profile of taxed attentional demands and avoidance that leaves little room to actively engage in rewarding aspects of situations enough to produce flow experiences. These attentional demands are especially likely to inhibit flow experiences, specifically because flow experiences require ample effort to focus toward challenging situations and ample attention to perceive oneself as performing well in these situations.

Flow experiences occur naturally in situations where perceived performance matches the perceived challenge of a situation. As reviewed, experiential avoidance in SAD should often inhibit these opportunities, and attentional biases in SAD should often inhibit these perceptions (Kashdan et al., 2011; Kashdan et al., 2013). With this framework in mind, Hypotheses 1 and 2 are as follows:

H1. The probability of a flow event occurring will be lower in individuals with SAD than healthy controls, regardless of the situation.

H2. The difference in the probability of a flow event occurring in a social situation in SAD vs healthy controls will be greater than the difference in the probability of a flow event occurring in general in SAD vs healthy controls. Essentially, a larger effect of diagnostic status affecting the probability of flow ought to be evident in social situations compared to all situations.

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