



SOCIAL PHOBIA AND PERFECTIONISM

Harlan R. Juster,^{1*} Richard G. Heimberg,¹ Randy O. Frost,² Craig S. Holt,³
Jill I. Mattia¹ and Karen Faccenda¹

¹Social Phobia Program, Center for Stress and Anxiety Disorders, Department of Psychology, University of Albany, State University of New York, Albany, NY, U.S.A., ²Department of Psychology, Smith College, Northampton, MA, U.S.A. and ³University of Iowa and Iowa City Veterans Administration Medical Center, Iowa City, IA, U.S.A.

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Summary—Clinical evidence suggests that components of perfectionism may have special relevance to social phobia. This study examines this relationship by comparing 61 patients with social phobia and 39 community volunteers with no anxiety disorder on Frost, Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate's (1990) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS). Social phobia patients scored higher on subscales assessing concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, and perceived parental criticism. Community volunteers scored higher on the organization subscale. It was further hypothesized that, for the social phobia patients, perfectionism would be associated with greater symptom severity. Correlational analysis confirmed that the Concern over Mistakes and Doubts about Actions subscales of the MPS were consistently associated with greater social anxiety, trait anxiety, and general psychopathology. Implications for the treatment of social phobia patients are considered. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Social phobia is a fear of situations in which an individual may be under the scrutiny of others and expects to act in an embarrassing or humiliating manner (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Individuals with social phobia often fear making unintelligent, unintelligible or socially inappropriate comments. They may fear that anxiety symptoms, such as blushing, sweating, or shaking, will be obvious to others, thereby 'giving away' that they are anxious. These and other fears about being the center of attention are often associated with doubt about one's competence.

Although we have learned much about social phobia in the last several years, we know little about personality dimensions which may influence the severity of patients' distress or have implications for how they respond to various treatment strategies. This study examines one such dimension, perfectionism. Frost, Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate (1990) define perfectionism as the setting of excessively high personal standards plus a tendency to be overly self-critical upon failure to meet those standards. Frost *et al.* (1990) developed the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) to measure the key concepts of excessive personal standards and overconcern about making mistakes, and included other scales which have conceptual relevance to perfectionism including doubts about the quality of one's actions, parental expectations, parental criticisms, and extreme organization.

Perfectionism has been implicated as a factor in a variety of mental disorders including obsessive-compulsive disorder (e.g. McFall & Wollersheim, 1979), eating disorders (e.g., Garner, Garfinkel & Bemis, 1982), depression (Burns, 1980), and anxiety (e.g., Deffenbacher, Zwemer, Whisman, Hill & Sloan, 1986) and appears to have relevance to the clinical manifestations of social phobia. For example, our clinical experience suggests that individuals with social phobia often set virtually unattainable goals for themselves (excessive standards of performance) in feared social situations, thereby guaranteeing the occurrence of 'mistakes' in these situations. They also appear to make unreasonable comparisons when judging their own competence. Their public speaking efforts may be compared with the performance of television commentators or public officials while their social interactional behaviors are compared with those of the 'life of the party'. When social phobic individuals do perform up to 'par', they are clearly not objective observers of their own behavior

* To whom all correspondence should be addressed at: Center for Stress and Anxiety Disorders, Pine West Plaza Building 4, Washington Avenue Extension, Albany, NY 12205, U.S.A.

and will often devalue their otherwise solid performance or disqualify the situation as one that is atypical in some critical way (e.g. "I did well because the audience felt sorry for me" or "he was trying to be nice") (Rapee & Lim, 1992). Furthermore, social phobic individuals engage in frequent avoidance of unfamiliar activities, possibly for fear of performing below standards.

Heimberg and his colleagues (Heimberg & Becker, *in press*; Heimberg, Juster, Hope & Mattia, 1995) have developed a model of social phobia which may help explain the link between social phobia and perfectionism. Briefly, this model proposes that a genetic susceptibility combines with early experience to sensitize individuals to view social encounters as threatening experiences. A set of (perfectionistic) beliefs develops which primes individuals to expect negative consequences in social situations, resulting in anxiety and often avoidance. Specifically, individuals with social phobia come to believe that (1) social situations are potentially dangerous (i.e. humiliating), (2) danger may be averted only by social performance above a very high standard (i.e. perfect performance), and (3) they are not capable of achieving the necessary standard to avoid danger.

Achieving a certain standard may be hampered by over attention to mistakes in social situations. A vicious cycle may exist in which the expectation of mistakes produces excessive focus on evaluation of one's performance which, in turn, causes a reduction in attention to the actual task, making mistakes more likely. Any mistake reduces the likelihood of attaining the desired standard, and therefore becomes an indicator of failure. Even when mistakes are within normal limits of magnitude or frequency for a particular situation, over attention to them may result in a biased view of the situation as a failure. Thus, excessive standards and concern over mistakes appear to be closely linked characteristics of individuals with social phobia.

Although there is no direct evidence linking perfectionism and social phobia, several studies have examined the relationship among perfectionism, excessive standard setting, and social or performance anxiety in nonclinical populations. Each of these areas will be briefly considered.

Frost and Henderson (1991) found that, for a sample of female college athletes, perfectionistic concern over mistakes was positively correlated with anxiety about performance in competition. Conversely, concern with mistakes and self-doubts were negatively correlated with self-confidence regarding athletic performance. Frost and Marten (1990) showed that perfectionistic college students, compared with nonperfectionistic students, experienced higher levels of negative affect while completing a writing task under conditions of high evaluative threat, a situation analogous to social encounters for social phobia patients. High perfectionistic students reported that doing well on the writing task was more important to them than it was to low perfectionistic students and believed they should have done better on the task as well.

Test-taking is another area of academic performance which may activate evaluative anxiety. In fact, DSM-IV describes test anxiety as a variant of social phobia in which individuals fear indirect evaluation. Juster, Brown, Heimberg, Makris, Leung and Frost (1994) examined the association between Frost's MPS and a measure of test anxiety in a sample of undergraduates. Predictably, the Concern over Mistakes and Doubts about Actions subscales were positively correlated with the cognitive and physiological responses associated with test anxiety. Mor, Day, Flett and Hewitt (1995) found that performance anxiety in professional musicians, actors, and dancers was positively correlated with perfectionistic personal and social standards. The largest association was found between socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e. standards based on others' expectations) and anxiety. Clearly, perfectionism is associated with anxiety and other negative reactions in situations where individuals believe they are being evaluated.

Negative reactions associated with concern over mistakes have received particular attention. This component of perfectionism is defined as negative cognitive reactions to mistakes, the tendency to equate mistakes with failure, and the expectation of negative responses from others regarding mistakes. Athletes high on concern over mistakes reported that they were more likely to focus on the negative aspects of their mistakes (Frost & Henderson, 1991). These include increased worry about others' reactions, greater likelihood of feeling they let themselves down, more pressure to make up for the mistake, greater difficulty forgetting about it, and more recurrent images of the mistake.

In another study, students scoring high on the Concern over Mistakes subscale of the MPS reported more negative affect and lower self-confidence, believed others judged them more harshly, and were more likely to conceal the details of their performance than low Concern over Mistakes

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