



Pergamon

Journal of Anxiety Disorders, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 209–223, 1998
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0887-6185/98 \$19.00 + .00

PII S0887-6185(98)00010-3

An Investigation of Gender Differences in Social Phobia

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Abstract—The present study was an exploratory investigation of gender differences in a large sample of persons with social phobia. Potential differences in demographic characteristics, comorbidity, severity of fear, and situations feared were examined. No differences were found on history of social phobia, social phobia subtype, or comorbidity of additional anxiety disorders, mood disorders, or avoidant personality disorder. However, women exhibited more severe social fears as indexed by several assessment instruments. Some differences between men and women also emerged in their report of severity of fear in specific situations. Women reported significantly greater fear than men while talking to authority, acting/performing/giving a talk in front of an audience, working while being observed, entering a room when others are already seated, being the

This study was supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health to Drs. Heimberg (MH44119), Liebowitz (MH40121), and to the New York State Psychiatric Institute MHCRC (PO5 MH30906).

Portions of this paper were presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy, Atlanta, GA, November, 1993.

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center of attention, speaking up at a meeting, expressing disagreement or disapproval to people they do not know very well, giving a report to a group, and giving a party. Men reported significantly more fear than women regarding urinating in public bathrooms and returning goods to a store. Additionally, there were some differences in the proportion of men and women reporting fear in different situations. Specifically, more women than men reported fear of going to a party, and more men than women reported fear of urinating in a public restroom. Gender differences among patients with social phobia are discussed in the context of traditional sex-role expectations. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd

In recent years, research has increasingly focused on gender differences in the anxiety disorders (e.g., Bekker, 1996; Castle, Deale, & Marks, 1995; Oei, Wanstall, & Evans, 1990). Gender differences in demographic characteristics, comorbidity, symptom presentation, and severity may influence the selection of target behaviors and the course and outcome of therapeutic interventions.

Agoraphobia has been the focus of the most research and theoretical work regarding gender differences because of the disproportionate number of women suffering from the disorder (see Bekker, 1996, for a review). However, few gender differences among patients with agoraphobia have been found, and the differences that have emerged have been small in magnitude (Chambless & Mason, 1986; Cox, Swinson, Shulman, Kuch, & Reichman, 1993; Mavissakalian, 1985; Oei et al., 1990). Specific phobias also appear to be more prevalent among women than men. In a recent survey, more women than men had animal (snakes, spiders) and situational phobias (lightning, closed spaces, darkness, heights), but no gender differences were found in the prevalence of mutilation phobias (injections, dentists, injuries) (Fredrikson, Annas, Fischer, & Wik, 1996). Among patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder, women were more likely to be married, have children, and develop the disorder later in life than men (Castle et al., 1995; Noshirvani, Kasvikis, Marks, Tsakiris, & Monteiro, 1991). Despite the data accumulating about gender differences in the anxiety disorder, little is known about gender differences in the manifestation of social phobia.

Epidemiological studies suggest that social phobia is among the most prevalent of mental health problems and that in community samples it is more commonly observed among women than men. Based on the responses of over 13,000 people in four communities who participated in the Epidemiological Catchment Area (ECA) study, the lifetime prevalence rate of social phobia was reported to be 2.0% for men and 3.1% for women (Schneier, Johnson, Hornig, Liebowitz, & Weissman, 1992). Given that respondents in the ECA study were asked about impairment resulting from only three situations relevant to social phobia, these data may underestimate the prevalence of the disorder. The more recent National Comorbidity Survey (NCS), based on a stratified, multistage probability sample of over 8,000 individuals throughout the United States, inquired about fear and impairment in six social situations. The NCS, which utilized the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, third edition-

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