

# When ambiguity hurts: Social standards moderate self-appraisals in generalized social phobia

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## Abstract

Thirty-nine individuals with generalized social phobia (social anxiety disorder) and 39 nonclinical controls performed a public speech after receiving cues about social standards. Using a novel video manipulation paradigm, one third of participants received cues indicating that standards for performance were high, one third received cues that standards were low, and the remaining third were given no explicit information about expected standards (i.e., standards were ambiguous). Individuals with social phobia performed objectively worse than controls in all conditions, but rated their performance as being worse only in the high and ambiguous standards conditions. These results suggest that in social phobia, negative self-perception is context-dependent. Implications for the cognitive model and treatment are discussed.

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*Keywords:* Social anxiety disorder; Self-appraisals; Self-discrepancy; Self-perception; Information processing

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## Introduction

Social anxiety is thought to arise when individuals are highly motivated to make a good impression on others in social situations but believe they are incapable of doing so (Gilbert, 2001; Leary, 2001; Leary & Kowalski, 1995; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Cognitive theories suggest that negative perception of self plays a central role in the maintenance of social phobia (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). On the basis of early learning experiences, individuals with social phobia develop a number of negative assumptions about themselves (e.g., “I’m stupid,” “I’m unattractive,” etc.; Clark & Wells, 1995) that become reinforced over time by selective information processing errors, which occur both within and between social encounters (see Clark & McManus, 2002; Heinrichs & Hofmann, 2001; Hirsch & Clark, 2004). When faced with social threat, individuals with social phobia shift their attention inward and engage in a process of detailed self-monitoring (Spurr & Stopa, 2002), during which they experience spontaneous, recurrent, and excessively negative self-images that they perceive as being accurate (Hackmann, Clark, & McManus, 2000; Hackmann, Surawy, & Clark, 1998).

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Following a social encounter, socially phobic individuals appraise their own behavior in a manner that greatly exaggerates their shortcomings and minimizes their performance accomplishments (Alden & Wallace, 1995; Norton & Hope, 2001; Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993). But what is the proximal cause of these negative self-appraisals? From the perspective of the cognitive model, individuals with social phobia form negative mental self-representations based on how they believe the “implicit audience” views them at any given moment (e.g., Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). This intriguing theory suggests that negative self-appraisals are flexible, dynamic, responses that are dependent on the nature and type of information that is available about potential audience evaluators and their standards for performance. Previous studies have demonstrated that patients with social phobia perceive their self-attributes to fall short of the characteristics they believe others expect them to possess (e.g., Strauman, 1989, 1992; Strauman & Higgins, 1987; Weilage & Hope, 1999). Furthermore, socially anxious or phobic individuals under social threat experience state self-discrepancies that are characterized by an underestimation of their abilities relative to others’ standards (Alden, Bieling, & Wallace, 1994; Wallace & Alden, 1991). To our knowledge, however, no studies have directly examined the hypothesis that negative state self-appraisals are activated by the nature and type of information that is available about audience performance standards.

Evidence suggests that socially anxious and phobic individuals are attuned to the standards that others hold for their social behavior and that perceived standards may, in turn, influence self-perception, affect, and performance. Baldwin and Main (2001) found that implicit contextual cues signifying “rejection” may activate cognitive networks that are associated with negative self-judgments in high self-conscious female undergraduates. Others have found that socially anxious individuals might employ the self-presentational strategy of purposeful failure as a way to influence others to lower their performance standards to a level they can more confidently match (Baumgardner & Brownlee, 1987). Finally, Wallace and Alden (1995, 1997) found that individuals with social phobia who received unexpected positive feedback following a social encounter reported *increased* anxiety about a future interaction because they believed that their interaction partners would subsequently hold *higher* standards for their performance.

In the present study, our objectives were twofold. First, we wished to examine more closely whether individuals with social phobia believe that audience evaluators hold excessively high standards for social performance. Although patients with social phobia tend to report high levels of socially-prescribed perfectionism on trait self-report questionnaires (e.g., Antony, Purdon, Huta, & Swinson, 1998), previous studies examining social phobic beliefs that are activated during actual social situations have found, surprisingly, that patients’ estimations of others’ standards do not exceed those of nonanxious controls (Alden et al., 1994; Wallace & Alden, 1991). However, studies reporting this null effect did not control for the possibility that socially anxious participants may have assumed that audience members were aware that they were socially anxious. Thus, anxious participants may have rated perceived standards in line with their belief that audience members expected them to perform poorly as a result of their anxiety and, therefore, held low expectations for them. In the present study, we attempted to control for this possible confound by informing participants that audience members “*will not know anything about you or the purpose of the experiment.*” We expected that under these conditions, individuals with social phobia would provide ratings of audience standards that were significantly higher than those of controls. We also expected that individuals with social phobia would provide lower predicted ratings of their own performance in comparison to controls.

Second, we examined whether self-appraisals and social performance are moderated by the nature and type of information presented to individuals about social standards. To answer this question, we randomly assigned patients with social phobia and healthy controls to one of three conditions that differed according to the nature and availability of information about social standards. Prior to performing a socially threatening task, one third of participants were exposed to cues indicating that standards for performance were high, one third were exposed to cues indicating that standards were low, and the remaining third were given no explicit information about expected standards (i.e., standards were ambiguous). We expected the self-appraisals, performance, and affect of individuals with social phobia to be more negative than controls in the high standards condition relative to the low standards condition. In addition, since previous studies have demonstrated that individuals with social phobia tend to interpret ambiguous social information in a negative manner (e.g., Amir, Foa, & Coles, 1998; Stopa & Clark, 2000), we expected patients’ self-appraisals, affect, and performance in the no standards condition to resemble those of patients in the high standards condition.

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