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Behaviour Research and Therapy 41 (2003) 555–572

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# Internal versus external attention in social anxiety: an investigation using a novel paradigm

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Accepted 20 February 2002

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## Abstract

Several cognitive models propose that social anxiety is associated with increased self-focused attention. Indirect evidence for this hypothesis has been provided by questionnaire studies, and by cognitive psychology paradigms that have demonstrated reduced processing of external information during feared social-evaluative situations. However, no studies have simultaneously measured on-line attention to internal and external events. A probe detection task that aimed to measure the balance of attention between internal and external stimuli was developed. High and low socially anxious individuals were instructed to detect two probes. The external probe was superimposed on pictures of faces (happy, neutral, angry) or household objects that were presented on a VDU. The 'internal' probe was a pulse to the finger which participants were led to believe represented significant changes in their physiology. Compared to low speech anxious individuals, high speech anxious individuals showed an internal attentional bias, that was specific to conditions of social-evaluative threat.

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*Keywords:* Social anxiety; Social phobia; Self-focus; Faces; Selective attention

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## 1. An investigation using a novel paradigm

Self-focused attention has been implicated as an important cognitive process in both clinical (Ingram, 1990; Wells & Matthews, 1994) and non-clinical populations (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). Carver and Scheier (1981, 1998) suggest that flexible self-focused attention may be part of a functional process that highlights the discrepancy between one's present perceived state and desired standards of performance, thereby

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motivating a change in behaviour to reduce the discrepancy. In the literature on clinical populations, it has been suggested that individuals with psychological disorders demonstrate excessive self-focused attention, which leads to several dysfunctional effects, such as intensifying emotional states, reducing effortful coping and impairing task performance (see Ingram, 1990; Wells & Matthews, 1994, for reviews).

Excessive self-focused attention plays an important role in several cognitive models of social anxiety (e.g. Clark & Wells, 1995; Hartman, 1983; Hope, Gansler, & Heimberg, 1989; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). For example, Clark and Wells (1995) propose that when patients with social phobia become concerned that they may fail to make their desired impression on other people, their attention shifts from observation of others to detailed monitoring and observation of themselves. They then use the misleading interoceptive information produced by self-monitoring as evidence they are making a negative impression on others. It is suggested that several types of internal information are utilized, including images, thoughts and physiological reactions. Such a processing bias would maintain social anxiety by generating inappropriately misleading information, preventing access to external information that could disconfirm patients' negative beliefs, and instigating negative behaviors that are noticeable to others.

A range of indirect sources of evidence suggests that self-focused attention is associated with social anxiety. Self-report questionnaires such as the public and private self-consciousness scales (Fenigstein et al., 1975) can be used to assess self-focused attention. Several studies have found significant correlations between social anxiety scales and both measures (Hope & Heimberg, 1988; Monfries & Kafer, 1994; Saboonchi & Lundh, 1997), although two studies have found a correlation with public but not private self-consciousness (Bögels, Alberts, & de Jong, 1996; Smari, Clausen, Hardarson, & Arnarson 1995). In addition, Jostes, Pook, and Florin (1999) found levels of both public and private self-consciousness in individuals with social phobia to be significantly higher than that of patients with bulimia and non-patient controls. High socially anxious individuals also report more self-focused attention during social-evaluative situations. Hope, Heimberg, and Klein (1990) found that high socially anxious individuals score higher on modified state versions of the public and private self-consciousness scales than low socially anxious individuals during a conversation with a stranger. Similarly, shy individuals have been found to spend a higher percentage of time than non-shy individuals focusing on the impression they are making and thinking about what to say next (Melchior & Cheek, 1990).

A shortcoming of questionnaire studies is that they rely on subjective ratings, whereas experimental paradigms have the potential to provide more objective measures. For instance, one might infer that individuals are engaging in self-focused attention if they demonstrate reduced processing of external social cues. In the study by Hope et al. (1990), high and low socially anxious females had a conversation with a male confederate on a number of fixed topics. The high socially anxious participants recalled less information and made more errors in recall than the low socially anxious participants. Similarly, a study of public speaking (Daly, Vangelisti, & Lawrence, 1989) demonstrated that high public-speaking anxious individuals recalled fewer elements of the environment present during their speech. Encouragingly, Mellings and Alden (2000) demonstrated a convergence of self-report and objective measures; they found that recall of external social information (details of conversation partner) was poorest in individuals who reported that they were more self-focused during the interaction. In a study of attentional bias, Mansell, Clark, Ehlers, and Chen (1999) found that high socially anxious individuals who were expecting to be socially

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