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Social anxiety and interpersonal perception: a social relations model analysis

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Abstract

Cognitive models of social phobia posit that an individual's negative beliefs about the way he or she is perceived by others (metaperceptions) are a core feature of the disorder. The social relations model (Kenny, 1994) *Interpersonal perception: A social relations analysis*. New York: Guilford) was used to analyze interpersonal perception data collected following unstructured social interactions in 62 socially anxious (SA) and 62 not socially anxious (NSA) individuals. Using this model, the interpersonal perceptions were analyzed to evaluate whether pathological levels of social anxiety are associated with self-perceptions, metaperceptions, and perceptions from others. SA participants saw themselves negatively and believed others saw them negatively. Although seen as more nervous by others, SA participants were not seen as less likeable. A mediational model demonstrated that the negative metaperceptions of SA individuals were more a function of their own self-perceptions than the negative perceptions of others. These findings were not attributable to depressive symptoms. Implications for theory and treatment of social phobia are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social phobia (also known as social anxiety disorder) is characterized by an intense fear of being negatively evaluated by others, in conjunction with avoidance of (or distress in) situations

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in which this fear is activated (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Cognitive biases have been implicated in the etiology and maintenance of the disorder (Clark & Wells, 1995; Foa, Franklin, Perry, & Herbert, 1996; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997), including attention and memory biases (Amir, Foa, & Coles, 1998, 2001; Asmundson & Stein, 1994; Foa, Gilboa-Schechtman, Amir, & Freshman, 2000; Gilboa-Schechtman, Foa, & Amir, 1999; Hackmann, Clark, & McManus, 2000; Mattia, Heimberg, & Hope, 1993) and interpretative biases for socially relevant information (Alden & Wallace, 1995; Mellings & Alden, 2000; Stopa & Clark, 2000).

Evaluative and interpretative biases may be particularly revealing of how persons with social phobia process information in social situations and then use this information to guide their expectations and future actions. Alden and Wallace (1995) had 32 patients with generalized social phobia (GSP) and 32 non-clinical controls participate in a dyadic “get acquainted” interaction with an experimental assistant who engaged in either positive or negative social behavior. The patients with GSP displayed a negative bias in their appraisals of some, but not all, aspects of their social performance; they displayed, however, a positive bias when appraising their partner’s performance (Alden & Wallace, 1995). Subsequent work by this research group has confirmed that these biases in social judgments are driven by selective attention to negative self-related information (Mellings & Alden, 2000).

Stopa and Clark (2000) found that persons with GSP, compared to other anxiety disordered or non-anxious subjects, interpreted ambiguous social events (e.g. someone looks out of the window while in conversation with them) in a negative fashion. Furthermore, persons with GSP interpreted mildly negative social events (e.g. someone disagrees with their opinion on a subject) in a negative self-referential (“I’m boring”) and catastrophic (“I’ll lose my job”) fashion. These interpretations are hypothesized to lead to anxious apprehension and avoidance of future social opportunities.

Although data provided by studies of hypothetical social interactions are useful, studies that directly assess interpersonal perceptions during actual social interactions provide much-needed in vivo confirmatory data. These studies can also assess how others perceive persons with high social anxiety. This information might be especially valuable—for example, in cognitive behavioral therapy—for helping patients with social phobia understand how others actually see them. These kinds of studies have been rare, presumably because of the difficulty in designing and interpreting them. Fortunately, recent innovations in the analysis of social interaction data can be applied to this problem, providing a structure for testing and comprehending not only the interpersonal perceptions of the individual with high social anxiety, but also those of the person with whom he or she is interacting.

1.1. The social relations model

One of the inherent difficulties in studying interpersonal interactions is that both the perceiver and his or her target may influence perceptions in these contexts. For example, Alice’s ratings of Bill’s sociability is partly determined by Bill’s behavior and partly determined by how Alice views others in general. The social relations model (SRM; Kenny, 1994) provides both a theoretical and data analytic framework to account for the non-independence of the perceiver and the target.

In the SRM, three sources of variance (denoted as perceiver, target, and relationship) contribute to any perception of another person’s personality or behavior. The *perceiver* effect is the portion

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