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## The impact of self-construals on social anxiety: a gender-specific interaction

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### Abstract

Ninety-seven American-born, Caucasian participants completed self-report questionnaires in a study examining the impact of gender, gender role orientation and independent and interdependent self-construals upon social anxiety. Three significant findings emerged: gender membership did not predict social anxiety severity, identification with a traditionally masculine gender role orientation decreased risk for social anxiety, and self-construals predicted levels of social anxiety differentially in men and women. In men, interdependence and independence predicted levels of social anxiety positively and negatively, respectively, while these patterns of association were reversed in women. Implications of the results are discussed in terms of the role of gender-specific cultural expectations and self-discrepancies in social anxiety.

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### 1. Introduction

The “cognitive self” and self-related processes are prominent in contemporary psychological theories of anxiety (Strauman & Segal, 2001). Cognitive models ascribe an essential role to

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negative self-perception in the development and maintenance of social anxiety (e.g., Clark & Wells, 1995; Gilbert, 2001; Leary, 2001; Leary & Kowalski, 1990, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). According to these models, on the basis of early experience, socially anxious individuals develop a number of distorted beliefs about themselves and their environment, which become salient during social encounters. When faced with social threat, they show an increased internal focus of attention (Beidel, Turner, & Dancu, 1985; Cacioppo, Glass, & Merluzzi, 1979; Glasgow & Arkowitz, 1975; Glass, Merluzzi, Biever, & Larsen, 1982; Hope, Gansler, & Heimberg, 1989; Stopa & Clark, 1993; Spurr & Stopa, 2002) and experience spontaneous, recurrent, negative self-constructions, which they assume to be valid (e.g., Hackmann, Clark, & McManus, 2000).

In recent years, research has focused on detecting and deciphering cognitive biases among socially anxious or phobic individuals in their anticipation, recollection, and judgment of past and future social events. Although this approach has proven fruitful in elucidating the information-processing errors that underlie social anxiety and social phobia (Clark & McManus, 2002; Heinrichs & Hofmann, 2001), it has been limited by its relative neglect of the broader “cognitive context” in which these processing errors may occur. Indeed, there has been scant research on the overlaying self-schemas that impact the way socially anxious individuals organize and make sense of their social worlds.

As reviewed by Strauman and Segal (2001), self-schemas refer to salient, emotionally charged, organized knowledge about identity, character, personal value, self-capacities, past experiences, and so on, that exert a top-down influence on the stream of social information-processing. In other words, they are complex narrative lenses through which individuals interpret and appraise social information. They shape individuals' expectations regarding future events and significantly influence the way in which people plan, execute, and evaluate social behavior. Clinical psychologists have long recognized the influence of global, dysfunctional beliefs on emotion and behavior (e.g., Beck & Emery, 1985).

It appears that individual differences in social anxiety are not associated with situation-specific (e.g., social demands), *threat-based* schemata (Wenzel & Holt, 2003). For example, socially anxious individuals do not exhibit a memory bias toward the recall of negative non-schematic social information (Wenzel, Haugen, & Schmutzer, 2003). However, little is known about whether and how *global* self-schemas impact social anxiety and social information-processing. In this study, we examined *gender role orientation* and *self-constructions of independence or interdependence*, which are global domains that shape the way individuals view themselves, approach others, and understand the world around them. To date, there has been little research exploring the influence of these domains and the experience of social anxiety.

### 1.1. *Gender and gender role identification*

Historically, the constructs of masculinity and femininity were thought to lie on opposite ends of a unitary dimension. Three decades ago, however, Bem (1974), in her classic study on psychological androgyny, challenged this traditional belief by reasoning that a single individual can be, “both masculine and feminine, both assertive and yielding, both instrumental and expressive” (p. 155). To test this hypothesis, Bem devised a new sex-role inventory, which treated masculinity and femininity as two independent dimensions. The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) enabled

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