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Affective outcomes in superficial and intimate interactions: Roles of social anxiety and curiosity [☆]

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Abstract

We examined the roles of trait curiosity and social anxiety (and the contributions of the behavioral inhibition and activation systems; BIS, BAS) in predicting positive and negative affect (PA; NA) during social interactions. In Study 1, individuals interacted with same-sex confederates on topics that gradually escalated in emotional self-disclosure. In Study 2, cross-sex pairs of students were randomly assigned to a closeness-generating or small-talk interaction. There were several consistent findings across studies. Higher curiosity uniquely predicted greater interpersonally generated PA. Higher social anxiety uniquely predicted greater interpersonally generated NA in Study 1, and in Study 2, this relationship varied by social context. Specifically, high compared to low socially anxious individuals reported greater NA during small-talk, with no differences during intimate interactions. Furthermore, Study 2 demonstrated that individuals with stronger BAS's experienced greater PA in the intimate compared to small-talk condition. There appear to be important traits that differentially contribute to appetitive and aversive interpersonal experiences. © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Social anxiety; Curiosity; Affect; Social interaction

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1. Introduction

Research consistently has found strong relations between positive emotions and various indices of social activity (e.g., Clark & Watson, 1988; Watson, Clark, McIntyre, & Hamaker, 1992). Yet, individuals differ in the degree intimate conversations are perceived as enjoyable, with some even considering them aversive. Despite our present state of knowledge on the basic human desire to relate to others and consistent associations between pleasant feelings and social activity, interindividual variability in the affective quality of social interactions remains poorly understood.

The primary purpose of the present set of studies was to examine individual difference predictors of interpersonally generated, high energetic arousal components of positive and negative affect, otherwise known as Positive Activation (PA) (involving feelings of excitement, enthusiasm, and inspiration) and Negative Activation (NA) (involving feelings of nervousness, irritability, and shame) (Watson & Clark, 1999).¹ Recent theorists have suggested that personality cannot be divorced from context and that social interaction and relationships provide one of the most meaningful platforms for studying “personality in context” (Cooper, 2002). In contrast to prior studies examining general social activity by self-report (e.g., Burger & Caldwell, 2000; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000; Watson et al., 1992) and unstructured open-ended “getting acquainted” interactions (e.g., Heimberg, Mueller, Holt, Hope, & Liebowitz, 1992; Mellings & Alden, 2000), we were interested in theoretically derived between-person factors, social contexts, and Person \times Situation interactions to predict the affective quality of dyadic social interactions. These included (1) closeness-generating interactions (i.e., gradual reciprocal sharing of emotional self-disclosures) between participants and same-sex confederates, and (2) comparisons between small-talk and closeness-generating interactions between opposite-sex participants. If individuals interacted with a confederate trained to be friendly and engaging, and took turns asking and answering questions that gradually escalated in personal self-disclosure (mimicking the process of intimacy), what personality factors would predict PA and NA? Would the same personality factors predict pleasurable affective experiences in both intimate closeness-inducing conversations and small-talk or with same-sex confederates versus opposite-sex peers? Based on prior theory and research, we were interested in individual difference variables as predictors of interpersonally generated PA and NA, as well as when these effects occur (“moderator questions that seek to identify specific conditions under which an effect can be demonstrated or will be strongest”; Cooper, 2002, p. 760).

¹ Based on the prevailing theoretical and empirical literature on affect and social activity, the present studies focus on the activated dimensions of positive and negative affectivity. We measured deactivated PA and NA states in Study 2 (using the supplemental PANAS subscales in Barrett & Russell, 1998). Upon adjusting for pre-interaction affect, the only significant finding was that curiosity was uniquely negatively related to interpersonally generated deactivated-NA (e.g., feeling bored and tired). All deactivated affect results are available upon request.

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