The spotlight effect and the illusion of transparency in social anxiety

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Abstract

[Clark, D. M., & Wells, A. (1995). A cognitive model of social phobia. In: R. G. Heimberg, M. R. Liebowitz, D. A. Hope, & F. R. Schneier (Eds.), *Social phobia: diagnosis, assessment, and treatment* (pp. 69–93). New York: Guildford Press] cognitive model of social phobia suggests that both public and private sources of information contribute to the construction of the self as a social object, which is thought to maintain the disorder. This study used two concepts developed in social psychology that might help to explain the processes that contribute to the development of this constructed self. These two concepts are the spotlight effect [Gilovich, T., Medvec, V. H., & Savitsky, K. (2000). The spotlight effect in social judgment: an egocentric bias in estimates of the salience of one's own actions and appearance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(2), 211–222] and the illusion of transparency [Gilovich, T., Medvec, V. H., & Savitsky, K. (1998). The Illusion of transparency: biased assessments of others' ability to read one's own emotional states. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 75(2), 332–346]. Participants performed a memory task under either a low or a high social-evaluative condition. In the high social-evaluative condition, participants reported higher levels of the spotlight effect and more negative evaluation of task performance, compared to participants in the low social-evaluative condition. There were no differences between the two conditions in levels of the illusion of transparency. Surprisingly, however, in the low social-evaluative condition, participants reported higher levels of the illusion of transparency than the spotlight effect, whereas, in the high social-evaluative condition, they reported the opposite. Results suggest that the spotlight effect may be specific to social-evaluative concerns, whereas, the illusion of transparency may represent more general features of social anxiety concerns. Implications of the results for Clark and Wells' cognitive model of social phobia model are discussed.
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Current cognitive-behavioral models of social phobia (Clark, 2001; Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Turk, Lerner, Heimberg, & Rapee, 2001) propose that when socially phobic individuals fear negative evaluation by others in social situations, they shift attention onto detailed monitoring of themselves—also called self-focused attention. Clark and Wells suggest that individuals use self-focused attention to infer how they appear to others and to judge what others think about them, and they refer to this as ''processing of the self as a social object'' (p. 72). This type of processing locks socially phobic individuals into a closed system, in which most of the evidence for their anxieties is self-generated and disconfirmatory proof, for example, other people's responses, is either unavailable or is disregarded.

Self-focused attention is linked to social anxiety, negative self-judgments, and poor social performance in a number of studies (Woody, Chambless, & Glass, 1997). Woody (1996) examined self-focus in relation to anxiety and performance. Half of the socially phobic participants were in an active role (giving a speech), while, the other half were in a passive role (sitting in front of an audience while someone else was speaking). Self-focus was manipulated according to whether participants were talking about themselves (self-focus, active role), or about someone else (non-self-focus, active role), or whether they were being spoken about (self-focus, passive role), or just sitting in front of the audience (non-self-focus, passive role). Participants in the passive role reported significantly higher anticipated, self-rated, and observer-rated anxiety in the self-focus condition, compared to those in the non-self-focus condition. Woody's (1996) results suggest that self-focus increases self-rated and observed anxiety. More recently, Woody and Rodriguez (2000) showed that self-focused attention increased anxiety in socially phobic participants and controls, but that this increase in anxiety affected self-ratings of performance differently in the two groups. Observers rated the performance of both groups equally, but the control group gave higher ratings of their performance than the patient group, whose ratings were closer to observer's ratings, indicating a positive bias in participants' ratings in the control group. A reduction in self-focused attention is also associated with improvements in anxiety after cognitive-behavioral therapy for social phobia (Hofmann, 2000; Woody et al., 1997).

Self-focused attention and the construction of the self as a social object involve input from both internal and external sources of information (Turk et al., 2001). Clark (2001) suggests that socially phobic individuals use three types of internal information to construct a negative self-impression. One, feeling anxious is associated with appearing anxious. Two, many patients with social phobia experience spontaneously occurring images in which they view themselves from an observer's perspective. Three, more diffuse types of 'felt sense' can add to a negative self-impression. Turk et al. also suggest that memories of actual self-images and prior social experiences both contribute to this self-impression. Nevertheless, clinical observations also suggest that, in addition to focusing on their internal states, some socially phobic individuals believe that other people can see or detect aspects of their internal selves; for example, their thoughts, images, or feelings.

Clark and Wells (1995) appear to be less clear about the types of external information that socially phobic individuals use to construct a negative self-impression. However, Turk et al. (2001) suggest that feedback from others about one's appearance (e.g., weight, clothes, and actual physical defects) and behavior (e.g., posture, eye contact, and level of participation in conversations) add to a distorted self-impression. Collectively, it seems that both internal and external processes contribute to individuals' construction of themselves as a social object during social situations. However, at the moment, we do not fully understand exactly how the different processes contribute to a distorted self-view.