

# The effect of attentional focus on social anxiety

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## Abstract

The aim of the present study was to examine the effect of attentional focus on social anxiety in a group of high and low blushing-anxious subjects. One hundred and fourteen psychology undergraduate students were screened using the Fear of Blushing subscale of the Blushing Questionnaire [Bögels, S. M., & Reith, W. (1999). Validity of two questionnaires to assess social fears: The Dutch social phobia and anxiety questionnaire and the blushing, trembling and sweating questionnaire. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, 21, 51–66]. Those with the most extreme scores in the top and bottom 20% of the distribution were selected to form a high ( $n = 22$ ) and a low ( $n = 22$ ) blushing-anxious group. Subjects were randomly allocated to either a self-focused attention (SFA) condition or a task-focused attention (TFA) condition. They were asked to engage in a 5 min conversation with the first author, and were instructed to either self-focus (SFA condition) or task-focus (TFA condition). Levels of social anxiety and self-awareness were measured using visual analogue scales. Results suggest that there was a significant condition by group interaction, with high blushing individuals showing considerably higher levels of social anxiety in the SFA condition compared to the TFA condition while low blushing individuals showed no significant difference across the two conditions.

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Three major theories of self-awareness (Buss, 1980; Carver & Scheier, 1982; Duval & Wicklund, 1972) assume that individuals direct attention in two different ways: (i) externally, toward people, events in the world or the task at hand, or (ii) internally, toward aspects of the self such as one's appearance, thoughts, feelings or behaviour, producing a state of self-focused attention (SFA). Recent cognitive models of social anxiety have suggested that increased SFA is related to social anxiety. For example, both Clark and Wells (1995) and Rapee and Heimberg (1997) proposed that an increase in SFA plays a role in the maintenance of social anxiety. According to Rapee and Heimberg (1997), people with social phobia tend to have a more negative mental representation of their external appearance. Increasing SFA will enhance awareness to this negative mental representation, thus producing anxiety. Clark and Wells (1995) proposed that because people with social phobia are excessively self-aware, they do not process positive social feedback. As a result they rely on their own negative evaluations to assess their social performance. Based on these theoretical models, there should

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be an interaction between negative evaluation or negative mental representation and self-focus in producing social anxiety.

These theories should be especially true for those with blushing fears since increased physiological arousal enhances people's self-awareness (Fenigstein & Carver, 1978) and in turn SFA increases awareness of physiological reactions (Scheier, Carver, & Matthews, 1983). Because blushing is a visible symptom associated with social anxiety, the perception of this symptom is also likely to impact on the individual's mental representation of how he or she appears to the audience (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). So when those who are blushing-anxious start to blush, they will develop a negative mental representation of themselves, at the same time SFA is enhanced, causing them to feel socially anxious. Given the above, it is expected that SFA will be more likely to induce anxiety among high blushing-anxious individuals as compared to their low blushing-anxious counterparts.

Despite the theoretical models discussed above, research to date on the effect of SFA on social anxiety has provided mixed results. While some studies have suggested that increasing SFA will lead to social anxiety (e.g., Bögels & Lamers, 2002; Woody, 1996; Woody & Rodriguez, 2000), other studies have failed to show any anxiety-provoking effects of self-focus. For example, a study by Bögels, Rijsemus, and De Jong (2002) investigated the effect of experimentally heightened self-awareness on fear, blushing, cognitions, and social skills. No evidence was found to support the prediction that self-awareness increased fear, blushing, physiological arousal, or negative thinking or decreased task performance. However, in this study, the researchers used mirrors to induce self-awareness. In the context of a social task, the presence of a mirror provided participants with objective information about their appearance which may subsequently lead to correction of over- or underprediction of symptoms. Therefore, the corrective feedback that the mirror provided may have counteracted the debilitating effects of SFA (Bögels & Mansell, 2004).

By far the majority of research has shown a main effect of SFA but has failed to show evidence of an interaction, that is, self-focus appears to increase anxiety, both for socially anxious participants and controls (e.g., Bögels & Lamers, 2002; Woody & Rodriguez, 2000). For example, Bögels and Lamers (2002) investigated the effect of attentional focus on social anxiety using samples of socially anxious, blushing-anxious and socially phobic participants. Participants read 10 stories describing social events in which the main character was the centre of attention, and were then asked to imagine themselves as the main character. Attentional focus of the participant was manipulated (self-focused vs. task-focused), along with the type of feedback from audience (positive, neutral, and negative). It was found that social anxiety was mediated by the focus of attention: participants from all three samples reported higher levels of social anxiety when made self-focused than when task-focused. Similarly, Woody and Rodriguez (2000) also showed self-focus intensified social anxiety and impaired social performance in people with social phobia and normal controls. However, both studies are limited in their ecological validity. Bögels and Lamers (2002) used a set of hypothetical scripts, and, Woody and Rodriguez's study involved participants giving a speech in front of an audience, both situations may differ from day-to-day social interactions. Therefore, the effect of attentional focus on social anxiety in everyday social situations requires further research.

Also, most studies examining the effect of attentional focus on social anxiety have not included a manipulation of task-focused attention (TFA). Theoretical models of social anxiety predict that increasing task focus will reduce anxiety (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). In line with this, some research has indicated that TFA improves task performance. For example, Brockner and Hulton (1978) compared the performance of high and low self-esteem subjects on a concept formation task. Participants were placed under one of three conditions: (1) the audience condition, (2) control condition, and (3) task-focused condition. In the audience condition, participants sat in front of a one-way mirror and were informed that they were being observed by several people. In the task-focused condition, the participants were told that the task can be somewhat tricky, so they should focus their undivided attention on the task. In the control condition, no additional instructions were given. The authors found that low self-esteem participants performed worse than their high self-esteem counterparts in the audience condition, no differently in the control, and better than high self-esteem individuals during the task-focused condition. In addition, Bögels, Mulken, and De Jong (1997) presented two case studies showing that teaching patients with erytrophobia to redirect their attention to the task strongly decreased blushing propensity, fear of blushing, avoidance behaviour, and negative beliefs about the consequences of blushing. With this initial evidence supporting the potentially beneficial effects of TFA, it is

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