

The Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale: Assessing a proposed cognitive component of social anxiety[☆]

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Abstract

Cognitive-behavioral models propose that fear of negative evaluation is the core feature of social anxiety disorder. However, it may be that fear of evaluation *in general* is important in social anxiety, including fears of positive as well as negative evaluation. To test this hypothesis, we developed the Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale (FPES) and conducted analyses to examine the psychometric properties of the FPES, as well as test hypotheses regarding the construct of fear of positive evaluation (FPE). Responses from a large ($n = 1711$) undergraduate sample were utilized. The reliability, construct validity, and factorial validity of the FPES were examined; the distinction of FPE from fear of negative evaluation was evaluated utilizing confirmatory factor analysis; and the ability of FPE to predict social interaction anxiety above and beyond fear of negative evaluation was assessed. Results provide preliminary support for the psychometric properties of the FPES and the validity of the construct of FPE. The implications of FPE with respect to the study and treatment of social anxiety disorder are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social anxiety disorder (social phobia) is the fourth most common psychiatric disorder, with a lifetime prevalence rate of 12.1% (Kessler et al., 2005). It is characterized by excessive fear of social or performance situations. The majority of patients seeking treatment for social anxiety disorder report at least moderate

impairment in the areas of education, employment, family relationships, marriage and romantic relationships, and friendships (Schneier et al., 1994; Stein, McQuaid, Laffaye, & McCahill, 1999). Furthermore, the comorbidity of social anxiety disorder with other disorders that produce significant impairment in functioning, such as depression and alcoholism, is high (Kessler, Stang, Wittchen, Stein, & Walters, 1999; Schneier et al., 1994), and individuals with social anxiety disorder rate their quality of life as very low (Safren, Heimberg, Brown, & Holle, 1997). Given the debilitating nature of social anxiety disorder, it is essential that theoretical conceptualizations of the disorder address all possible contributing factors.

Cognitive-behavioral models of social anxiety disorder (e.g., Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg,

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1997) have labeled fear of negative evaluation (FNE) a core feature. Individuals with social anxiety disorder assume that others are inherently critical and therefore likely to evaluate them negatively (e.g., Leary, Kowalski, & Campbell, 1988). Furthermore, it has been hypothesized that socially anxious individuals form a biased image or mental representation of themselves as seen by others and simultaneously focus their attentional resources onto both this internal representation and onto perceived threats in the social environment. Specifically, attentional resources are allocated in part to the salient aspects of the image (i.e., those that are both relevant to the situation and potentially negative) and in part to monitoring the social environment for indicators of negative evaluation by others (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

Rapee and Heimberg (1997) further proposed that socially anxious individuals believe that others expect them to perform to unrealistically high standards in social situations. Because socially anxious individuals doubt their ability to meet these standards, the perceived likelihood of negative evaluation from the audience, as well as the undesirable social consequences that follow from it (e.g., rejection, loss of status), is likely to be high. Anticipation of negative evaluation elicits anxiety and devaluation of the mental representation of the self as seen by others, creating a maladaptive negative feedback loop.

Models which highlight FNE as a core feature of social anxiety are consistent with empirical findings that individuals with social anxiety disorder report negative mental representations of their appearance and behavior, particularly in anxiety-evoking social situations (e.g., Coles, Turk, Heimberg, & Fresco, 2001; Hackman, Surawy, & Clark, 1998). These models have been useful in explicating the manner in which individuals with social anxiety disorder both perceive and process information related to evaluation, as well as the manner in which these cognitive processes differ between individuals high and low in social anxiety (e.g., Foa, Franklin, Perry, & Herbert, 1996; Horley, Williams, Gonsalvez, & Gordon, 2004; Mansell & Clark, 1999). Nonetheless, current models may neglect a fundamental component of socially anxious cognition: individuals with social anxiety may fear *positive* evaluation as well as negative evaluation.

1.1. Theoretical precedents for the construct of fear of positive evaluation (FPE)

The present study is the first to examine FPE as a potential feature of social anxiety. However, a

theoretical model that is consistent in part with this notion is the ethological–psychobiological (i.e., psycho-evolutionary) model of social anxiety put forth by Gilbert (2001) and colleagues (e.g., Trower & Gilbert, 1989; Trower, Gilbert, & Sherling, 1990). According to this model, social anxiety is directly related to agonistic threat interactions in humans. The purpose of social anxiety is to avoid unnecessarily challenging the dominant member of a social group, while simultaneously remaining within the safe confines of the group. Thus, Gilbert (2001) proposes that social anxiety is an evolutionary mechanism that facilitates non-violent interactions between individuals. In outlining his ethological–psychobiological model, Gilbert suggested that, “Those who feel inferior may fear increases in status that might bring them into conflict with others, or they may fear that any gains could not be maintained or defended in the future” (2001, pp. 742–743). Gilbert dubbed this concept the “fear of doing well” (p. 742).

Furthermore, consistent with Gilbert’s (2001) interpretation, Wallace and Alden (1995, 1997) reported that socially anxious individuals who were exposed to positive social signals via structured social interaction roleplays rated their social performance positively and consequently worried that others would expect more of them. However, they also believed that their typical performance would not change. As a result, unlike persons without social anxiety, they worried that initial positive appraisal would lead to future negative appraisal. Indeed, after being given standardized (fictitious), positively framed feedback on their social performance in a roleplay that was constructed to go well, patients with social anxiety disorder predicted that they would experience greater anxiety in a follow-up roleplay. In contrast, patients given feedback highlighting the *absence of negative* aspects of their performance did not predict that they would experience higher anxiety in the follow-up roleplay (Alden, Mellings, & Lapsa, 2004). Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of examining the effects of positive social feedback on social anxiety. However, Wallace and Alden (1995, 1997) propose that fear of *eventual* negative appraisal (i.e., a delayed form of FNE) accounts for acute fear of positive appraisal, suggesting a lack of differentiation between the constructs of FPE and FNE. Therefore, one of the purposes of the present study was to test whether FPE makes a unique contribution to the prediction of social anxiety, as we propose, or (if not) whether FPE is merely a proxy for FNE.

Thus, the basic concept of FPE has some precedent. Indeed, Alden et al. (2004) have highlighted the need for future research to address the way in which socially

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