

The Looming Maladaptive Style in Social Anxiety

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This exploratory study examined the relationship between the looming maladaptive style (i.e., an enduring and traitlike cognitive pattern to appraise threat as rapidly rising in risk, progressively worsening, or actively speeding up and accelerating) and three different aspects of trait social anxiety (i.e., fear of negative evaluation, social interaction anxiety, and public scrutiny fears) as well as general anxiety and depression. A large nonclinical, female-only sample ($n=152$) completed the Looming Maladaptive Style Questionnaire–II (Riskind, J. H., Williams, N. L., Theodore, L. G., Chrosniak, L. D., & Cortina, J. M. (2000). The looming maladaptive style: Anxiety, danger, and schematic processing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 837–852), which assesses two types of looming vulnerability: social (i.e., looming appraisals in response to potentially threatening social situations) and physical (i.e., looming appraisals in response to potentially threatening physical stimuli). Multiple regression analyses indicated that social looming uniquely predicted fear of negative evaluation, social interaction anxiety, and public scrutiny fears, accounting for 7%, 4%, and 3% of the variance, respectively. However, social looming did not predict depression. These findings support the looming model of anxiety and encourage further attention to the possible role of social looming as an anxiety-specific vulnerability factor in social anxiety.

CONTEMPORARY COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL MODELS of social phobia (e.g., Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997) focus predominantly on the content of cognition, particularly at the knowledge and appraisal levels (e.g., on negative beliefs,

thoughts, and images in anxiety). Although the content of cognition is clearly important in determining the nature of social phobia, the process—namely, how people think—and the cognitive style that give negative thoughts and images their salience are also important dimensions that might have implications for the disorder. For example, in a recent qualitative study that explored high socially anxious individuals' anticipatory processing (Brown & Stopa, in preparation), one theme that emerged from the data was that individuals described anticipatory processing in *dynamic* terms. One individual described how she responded to being invited to an interview: "... my hands start sweating ... and then it accelerates, like two or three days before it." Another participant said, "... the closer it comes to the [event], then the more acutely aware you become of it, and then it just goes whoosh!" These descriptions suggest that we might need to look at broader aspects of cognition, and to focus explicitly on process, in order to better understand threat appraisals in social anxiety.

So how can we conceptualize a more dynamic view of threat appraisals in social anxiety? According to the model of looming vulnerability (Riskind, 1997), anxiety is related to differences in how individuals generate mental representations of dynamically increasing danger and rapidly rising risk (Riskind & Williams, 1999; Riskind, Williams, Theodore, Chrosniak, & Cortina, 2000). According to this model, a unique feature of the mental representations generated by anxious individuals is the perception of danger as unfolding and intensifying as one projects oneself into an anticipated future. This is like playing and replaying a movie or a videotape of a threat that is approaching, in which the threat is perceived as a dynamic object that is rapidly changing and rearranging itself in time and space (Riskind). This sense of looming vulnerability is differentiated from imminence, that is, perceived proximity, as a stimulus can be far away while quickly approaching or close

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by but motionless. The dynamic aspect creating fear in this model is the degree to which the stimulus is appraised as looming. With each moment that the stimulus advances, it becomes more threatening, and the individual perceives an increasing risk of losing control over the situation and his or her emotional response to it. The looming model adds specificity to cognitive models of social phobia that are mainly, although not exclusively, content-based (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

Riskind's (1997) model assumes that an individual's sense of looming vulnerability can occur in two forms. One is in response to threat in specific situations, whereas the other occurs as a more general cognitive disposition in clinical anxiety. For the latter, Riskind proposed the *looming maladaptive style* (LMS) as a general cognitive disposition, in which threat is judged as rapidly rising in risk and danger. The LMS is conceptualized as an evolutionary-based process of threat appraisal that biases the ways in which individuals mentally represent the spatial and temporal progression of potential future threat. Consequently, individuals who develop the LMS are likely to have difficulty habituating to possible threats and show increased vigilance, anxiety, and use of safety behaviors (Riskind; Riskind, Long, Duckworth, & Gessner, 2004). The LMS is also hypothesized as a unique cognitive risk factor for anxiety, but not for depression (Riskind et al., 2000).

The LMS has been investigated across a number of samples and in a number of anxiety disorders. Riskind et al. (2000) demonstrated that higher scores on the Looming Maladaptive Style Questionnaire-II (LMSQ-II¹; Riskind et al.) were significantly related to higher levels of anxiety, measured on the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck, Epstein, Brown, & Steer, 1988) and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970), in an unselected university sample. However, the LMS was not related to depression. Riskind and Williams (2005) showed that LMS scores were significantly elevated in both students who had a probable diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and a clinical GAD group, compared to students, community controls, and depressed patients. In the two studies reported in the paper, the probable GAD and clinical GAD

groups differed in LMS scores, independently of generally anxious and depressive symptoms. Collectively, these studies support the specificity of the LMS to anxiety.

Williams, Shahar, Riskind, and Joiner (2005) examined whether the social and physical looming scales of the LMSQ-II predicted common variance in the following anxiety disorder symptoms: obsessive-compulsive concerns, posttraumatic stress, generalized anxiety, specific phobic fears, and fear of negative evaluation (assessed by the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation scale [BFNE]; Leary, 1983), independently of depressive symptoms. Structural Eq. modeling (SEM) showed that the LMS predicted shared variance in a range of anxiety disorder symptoms, even after controlling for depression. Importantly, SEM revealed a specific link between social, but not physical, looming and fear of negative evaluation. Additionally, the correlation matrix provided by Williams et al. (2005) suggested that the Social Looming subscale of the LMSQ-II correlated more highly with fear of negative evaluation than the Physical Looming subscale.

Reardon and Williams (2007) replicated and extended Williams et al.'s (2005) study by testing the prediction that the LMS is an *anxiety-specific* vulnerability. Williams et al. had modeled depression as an independent variable and left the specificity of the LMS to anxiety untested. Reardon and Williams modeled depression as a dependent variable, in order to estimate its relationship to the LMS. They showed that the LMS demonstrated specificity only in predicting anxiety disorder symptoms, including social phobia (measured by the Social Phobia Diagnostic Questionnaire; Newman, Kachin, Zuellig, Constantino, & Cashman-McGrath, 2003). Furthermore, similar to Williams et al.'s findings, SEM demonstrated a specific link between social looming and social phobia, but not between physical looming and social phobia. Social looming also correlated more highly with social phobia than physical looming. Collectively, Williams et al.'s and Reardon and Williams' findings suggest specificity of social looming to fear of negative evaluation and social phobia, but not to depression.

The aim of the present study was to partially replicate and extend the two studies described above by examining multiple aspects of trait social anxiety, while controlling for general anxiety and depression. The three trait aspects were social interaction anxiety (assessed by the Social Interaction and Anxiety Scale [SIAS]; Mattick & Clarke, 1998²), fear of negative

¹ On the LMSQ-II, participants read six vignettes describing potentially stressful situations—three vignettes assess social looming (i.e., appraisals in response to potentially threatening social stimuli, such as negative evaluation by others during a speech) and three vignettes assess physical looming (i.e., appraisals in response to potentially threatening physical stimuli, such as experiencing heart palpitations).

² In accordance with most studies using the SIAS, we refer to the 20-item version that was circulated before its publication as a 19-item scale.

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