

Social anxiety and socially prescribed perfectionism: Unique and interactive relationships with maladaptive appraisal of interpersonal situations

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Abstract

Although investigators have suggested that maladaptive appraisal of interpersonal situations may be related to perfectionist characteristics of socially anxious persons, little research has addressed this notion. In this study, the joint role of social anxiety and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP; Hewitt & Flett, 1991a) was assessed relative to participants' appraisal of an interpersonal situation. Results showed that social anxiety and SPP were related with the discrepancy between participants' ratings of others' performance standards for them and ratings of their own self-efficacy for an upcoming conversation, and that SPP moderated the relationship between social anxiety and the discrepancy. Second, only social anxiety was related with the frequency of negative self-statements; however, SPP moderated the relationship between social anxiety and participants' negative self-statements relative to the conversation. For both interactions, the greater an anxious person's SPP, the greater their degree of maladaptive appraisal. Results are discussed relative to theoretical and clinical implications of the findings.

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1. Introduction

Although a number of theorists have discussed the potential role of perfectionism in problems of social anxiety (e.g., Heimberg & Becker, 2002; Schlenker & Leary, 1982), there has been little investigation of how perfectionist personality characteristics relate to social anxiety and its consequences. Recently, Alden, Ryder, and Mellings (2002), Bieling and Alden (1997) provided initial evidence as to the role of perfectionistic characteristics in social anxiety. Using a multidimensional measure of perfectionism, Alden, Bieling, and Wallace (1994) found that socially anxious women were higher in socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) but the two groups did not differ in self-oriented perfectionism (SOP). According to Hewitt and Flett (1991a),

SPP consists of a person's beliefs that others exert pressure on the individual to be perfect while SOP involves self-directed perfectionistic standards. The same differences in SPP but not in SOP were also found in a sample of male and female social phobics (Bieling & Alden, 1997). Thus, Alden et al. (2002) concluded that socially anxious and non-anxious people do not necessarily differ in self-imposed perfectionism but instead differ in their perception that others hold unreasonable expectations for them.

Cognitive-personality models of social anxiety (e.g., Clark & Wells, 1995) posit that trait social anxiety leads to a chronic discrepancy between a person's social self-efficacy and their perception of what constitutes desirable social performance. Based on this notion, Bieling and Alden (1997) evaluated whether social anxiety and SPP were related to one or both of these appraisal responses. They found that social anxiety was related to lower social self-efficacy but not to higher expectancies of others'

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standards. SPP was unrelated to social self-efficacy but was related to higher expectations of others' standards. Also, they found that SPP moderated the relationship between social anxiety and expectations of others' standards such that only anxious participants who were also high in SPP reported higher expectations of others' standards. Based on the previous findings, the present study sought to clarify the potential unique and interactive roles of social anxiety and SPP in relation to maladaptive appraisal of interpersonal situations. According to cognitive theories of social anxiety (e.g., Schlenker & Leary, 1982), appraisal of interpersonal situations typically involves two judgments: an estimate of one's own abilities (i.e., social self-efficacy) and an estimate of what is acceptable performance in the situation (i.e., others' standards) and, presumably, it is the discrepancy between these two appraisal responses that triggers social avoidance and negative affect. It is unclear, however, whether one or both of the traits of social anxiety and SPP make an additive and/or interactive contribution to such a discrepancy because previous research has not evaluated these appraisal responses as a discrepancy.

Consequently, the first purpose of the present study was to assess the separate and/or interactive relationships of trait social anxiety and SPP with the discrepancy that results from the difference between ratings of others' standards and ratings of one's own self-efficacy. Because an individual is likely to make both estimates in a simultaneous fashion, the estimates are just as likely to be related with personality dimensions that have an internal, individual origin or an external, interpersonal origin.

A second purpose of the study was to extend the analysis of how social anxiety and SPP relate to other maladaptive appraisal responses relative to an interpersonal situation such as negative and positive self-statements (e.g., Cacioppo, Glass, & Merluzzi, 1979). Although self-statements are likely related to the discrepancy between others' standards and self-efficacy, there is substantial evidence that greater negative self-statements and fewer positive self-statements are associated with social avoidance and negative affect (e.g., Mahone, Bruch, & Heimberg, 1993; Schwartz & Garamoni, 1989). Thus, the present study evaluated whether in addition to social anxiety, SPP has any direct or interactive relationship with the tendency to report greater negative self-statements and fewer positive self-statements relative to an interpersonal situation.

The present research exposed participants to a laboratory assessment procedure in which they were told that they would be meeting a stranger of the other gender and were to engage in a conversation to get to know the person. Prior to this anticipated interaction, participants rated their social self-efficacy as well as their perceptions of others' standards (i.e., the interaction partner) for their performance in the upcoming interaction. Because perceived social standards and efficacy ratings are complicated by subjective judgments, Wallace and Alden's (1991) "visual rating scale" procedure was used in this assessment. This procedure uses videotaped interactions of people display-

ing various levels of social effectiveness to serve as common anchors of skillfulness when rating both others' standards and self-efficacy.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 77 (47 female) community college students in the Northeastern United States. They ranged in age from 17 to 36 years, with a mean of 21.40 years. In terms of ethnic background, 53.1% of the participants identified themselves as white, 7.6% as African-American, 16.5% as Hispanic, 3.8% as Asian, 2.5% as Native American, and 16.5% as other. Participants volunteered for a study involving self and other perceptions when interacting with a stranger. All participants received a monetary remuneration.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Social anxiety

The Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS; Mattick & Clarke, 1998) was used to measure social anxiety which involves fears of being inarticulate, boring, and appearing awkward when interacting with others. Mattick and Clarke (1998) report an alpha of .88 in a college sample and an alpha of .90 in a community sample. Alpha in the present sample was .96. Relative to validity, the SIAS is correlated with the social avoidance and distress scale and the fear of negative evaluation scale (Watson & Friend, 1969) and discriminated among groups of social phobics, agoraphobics, and simple phobics (Mattick & Clarke, 1998).

2.2.2. Socially prescribed perfectionism

The socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) subscale from Hewitt and Flett (1991a) Multidimensional perfectionism scale was used to assess interpersonal sources of perfectionism. A sample item is "The better I do, the better I am expected to do". Hewitt and Flett (1991a) report an alpha of .87 and a test-retest reliability of .60 for the SPP. Coefficient alpha for the present sample was .90. Relative to validity, the SPP is related to measures of self-blame, fear of negative evaluation, depression and anxiety (Hewitt & Flett, 1991b). In addition, Hill, Zrull, and Turlington (1997) found that SPP was associated with several measures of maladaptive interpersonal behaviour including social distancing, conflict, and distrust.

2.2.3. Other standards – self-efficacy discrepancy

The first dependent variable consisted of the discrepancy between ratings of the perceptions of other peoples' standards minus ratings of social self-efficacy for one's performance. Participants rated their perceptions of others' standards and their social self-efficacy using a 10-point Visual Rating Scale (VRS) developed by Wallace and Alden (1991). The VRS uses videotapes of social interac-

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