

## The Relationship of Post-Event Processing to Self-Evaluation of Performance in Social Anxiety

Faith Brozovich  
Richard G. Heimberg  
Temple University

Socially anxious and control participants engaged in a social interaction with a confederate and then wrote about themselves or the other person (i.e., self-focused post-event processing [SF-PEP] vs. other-focused post-event processing [OF-PEP]) and completed several questionnaires. One week later, participants completed measures concerning their evaluation of their performance in the social interaction and the degree to which they engaged in post-event processing (PEP) during the week. Socially anxious individuals evaluated their performance in the social interaction more poorly than control participants, both immediately after and 1 week later. Socially anxious individuals assigned to the SF-PEP condition displayed fewer positive feelings about their performance compared to the socially anxious individuals in the OF-PEP condition as well as controls in either condition. Also, the trait tendency to engage in PEP moderated the effect of social anxiety on participants' evaluation of their performance in the interaction, such that high socially anxious individuals with high trait PEP scores evaluated themselves in the interaction more negatively at the later assessment. These results suggest that PEP and other self-evaluative processes may perpetuate the cycle of social anxiety.

SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER IS characterized by a fear of negative evaluation by others in social and/or performance situations in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000). When confronted with these situations, socially anxious individuals often experience great anxiety and distress. In addition, they may try to avoid anxiety-provoking social situations, often resulting in feelings of loneliness and isolation.

To better understand socially anxious individuals, cognitive-behavioral models of social anxiety/social anxiety disorder have been developed (Clark & Wells, 1995; Heimberg, Brozovich, & Rapee, 2010; Hofmann, 2007; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). These models rely on cognitive constructs, such as interpretation, attention, and memory, to help explain socially anxious individuals' behavior. They assert that when individuals with social anxiety are confronted with new social situations, they tend to interpret them in a manner unduly threatening to the self. Typically these interpretations are associated with increased anxiety, physiological arousal, and self-focused attention, which may also result in impaired performance. In addition, these models suggest that socially anxious individuals selectively remember and brood about negative self-relevant aspects of social events. Theoretically, this internal review of the social event, also known as post-event processing (PEP), contributes to an increase in socially anxious individuals' anticipatory anxiety and strengthens their desire to avoid future social interactions. At the present time, there is considerable evidence for biased interpretations and heightened self-focus in social anxiety; however, evidence supporting the memory bias implied in social anxiety is less well

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Address correspondence to Richard G. Heimberg, Ph.D., Adult Anxiety Clinic of Temple, Department of Psychology, Temple University, Weiss Hall, 1701 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122; e-mail: [heimberg@temple.edu](mailto:heimberg@temple.edu).

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developed (Brozovich & Heimberg, 2008). Below, we review research in these areas conducted with individuals with social anxiety disorder as well as nonclinical samples with elevated levels of social anxiety.

#### *Interpretation/Evaluation Bias*

Researchers have used a variety of paradigms to examine interpretation biases in socially anxious individuals. The overwhelming majority of studies have presented vignettes about social situations and found negative interpretation biases in individuals with high levels of social anxiety (e.g., Amir, Beard, & Bower, 2005; Brendle & Wenzel, 2004; Voncken, Bogels, & de Vries, 2003; Wenzel, Finstrom, Jordan, & Brendle, 2005), as well as samples of persons with social anxiety disorder (e.g., Amir, Foa, & Coles, 1998; Hertel, Brozovich, Joormann, & Gotlib, 2008; Stopa & Clark, 2000). In recent years, researchers have employed more sophisticated sentence completion paradigms and provided additional support for the finding that highly socially anxious individuals tend to interpret ambiguous social sentences in a negative manner (e.g., Huppert, Pasupuleti, Foa, & Mathews, 2007).

There is also substantial evidence that socially anxious individuals display biases in the evaluation of their own social performance. For example, in a study conducted by Rapee and Lim (1992), individuals with social anxiety disorder rated their performance in a brief impromptu speech significantly more poorly than their performance was rated by other participants. Similarly, Stopa and Clark (1993) demonstrated that socially anxious individuals rated their speech performance more negatively than it was rated by objective observers and more negatively than control participants. In addition, Mellings and Alden (2000) demonstrated the same phenomenon after a 10-min interaction with a confederate. Thus, socially anxious individuals display biased evaluations of their own performance in social situations.

#### *Post-Event Processing*

Clark and Wells (1995), Rapee and Heimberg (1997), Heimberg et al. (2010), and Hofmann (2007) describe how PEP may contribute to the maintenance of social anxiety disorder. It is hypothesized to serve as an intermediate process between one's initial interpretations and later recall. Individuals may engage in PEP following a social event or recalling it in anticipation of another social event. The content of one's thoughts while engaging in PEP often includes negative images and percep-

tions of the self in the social situation and memories of other social situations. This perseverative thought process often leads individuals to perceive themselves in a negatively biased manner. Over time, PEP may affect individuals' memory for events because they are continuously reconstructing their memory for the event to fit their negative self-image in and interpretation of social situations. As a result, it may also fuel their anticipatory anxiety and negative interpretation biases for social situations.

Several studies have investigated PEP in social anxiety/social anxiety disorder (see review by Brozovich & Heimberg, 2008). For example, in a study by Abbott and Rapee (2004), patients with social anxiety disorder completed a 3-min impromptu speech. Immediately afterward and 1 week later, participants assessed their performance. Socially anxious patients' negative appraisals of their performance in the speech task persisted over the 1-week interval, and they reported higher levels of negative PEP during the week compared to control participants.

Other studies have examined the relationship between PEP and memory in social anxiety. Mellings and Alden (2000) examined participants' recall of a role-played social interaction conducted the previous day. Socially anxious participants who were asked to focus on themselves (i.e., engage in a PEP task) recalled fewer partner-related and more negative self-related details of the interaction. In addition, Edwards, Rapee, and Franklin (2003) examined PEP following a speech task in a sample of students with high and low levels of social anxiety. Participants gave a 3-min impromptu speech; afterward, a researcher provided half positive and half negative feedback relevant to the individual's performance. Free recall of the feedback was measured at the session and 1 week later when participants were told that they would be giving another speech. Socially anxious individuals recalled more negative than positive feedback at both sessions compared to controls. They also brooded over the negative elements of the impromptu speech and negative feedback over the 1-week interval, whereas the control group brooded less.

It is evident from these studies that many socially anxious individuals engage in PEP following social situations. It makes intuitive sense that individuals would entertain thoughts about social situations after the fact because these situations are often ambiguous and demand some sort of interpretation. When individuals have high levels of social anxiety, the nature of their PEP often is negatively self-focused and perseverative. PEP appears to maintain self-relevant negative interpretations and may facilitate retrieval of other negative memories.

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