



Social problem solving and trait anxiety as predictors of worry in a college student population

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Abstract

This study examined the relations between trait anxiety, social problem-solving ability, and two different measures of worry in a sample of 353 college students. The worry measures were the Penn State Worry Questionnaire (PSWQ), which measures worry frequency, uncontrollability, and distress, and the Catastrophic Worry Questionnaire (CWQ), which assesses extreme negative outcome expectancies associated with worry. Results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses showed that social problem-solving ability accounted for a significant amount of variance in both worry measures even after trait anxiety was controlled. Three different dimensions of social problem-solving ability were found to be significantly associated with worry. Negative problem orientation was positively related to both worry measures after controlling for trait anxiety. In addition, rational problem solving and impulsivity/carelessness style were both positively related to the CWQ after controlling for trait anxiety and problem orientation, which suggests that catastrophic worry has both constructive and dysfunctional problem-solving aspects that cannot be accounted for by the person’s problem orientation. The implications of these findings for theory, research, and practice were discussed. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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In recent years, researchers and practitioners in psychology have begun to pay increasing attention to the construct of worry. In its more benign form, worrying appears to be a relatively common and possibly universal human experience that may even have some adaptive value (Davey, 1994a). However, when worry becomes excessive and difficult to control, it can be very disturbing, self-defeating, and maladaptive. In fact, excessive and uncontrollable worry has been identified as the central feature of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) in the Diagnostic and

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Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Fourth Edition (DSM-IV, American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Hence, worry is now recognized as a significant psychological phenomenon worthy of serious empirical investigation into its nature and causes. Based on the views of several investigators that worry often represents defective or dysfunctional attempts to solve problems (Borkovec, 1985; Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky, & DePree, 1983; Breznitz, 1971; Davey, 1994a; Stöber, Tepperwien, & Staak, 2000; Tallis, Davey, & Capuzzo, 1994), a number of recent studies have examined a possible link between social problem-solving processes and worry.

The term social problem solving refers to problem solving as it occurs in the natural environment (D’Zurilla & Nezu, 1982). Most of the research on the relations between social problem-solving variables and worry has been based on the model of social problem solving originally developed by D’Zurilla and Goldfried (1971) and later refined and expanded by D’Zurilla and Nezu (1982, 1999). According to this model, problem-solving outcomes in the real world are largely determined by two major, partially independent processes: (1) problem orientation and (2) problem-solving proper. Problem orientation is a metacognitive process involving the operation of a set of relatively stable cognitive-emotional schemas that describe how a person generally thinks and feels about problems in living, as well as his or her own problem-solving ability. Depending on its nature (positive vs. negative), a person’s problem orientation may either facilitate or inhibit problem-solving performance. Problem-solving proper is the core process in social problem solving, namely, the search for a solution through the application of problem-solving skills. Numerous studies have demonstrated that problem orientation and problem-solving skills are both important for effective real-life problem solving and adjustment (see review by D’Zurilla & Nezu, 1999).

Several studies have examined the relations between these two major components of social problem-solving ability and the experience of worry. In general, the findings have consistently demonstrated that problem orientation, but not problem-solving skills, is significantly related to worry in college students (Davey, 1994b; Davey, Hampton, Farrell, & Davidson, 1992; Davey, Jubb, & Cameron, 1996; Dugas, Letarte, Rhéaume, Freeston, & Ladouceur, 1995; Dugas, Freeston, & Ladouceur, 1997). Specifically, lower problem orientation scores are associated with higher levels of worry. In addition, other studies using clinical samples have found that GAD patients, whose worry is excessive and uncontrollable, have greater deficits in problem orientation (but not problem-solving skills) than other anxiety disorder patients and nonclinical controls (Dugas, Gagnon, Ladouceur, & Freeston, 1998; Ladouceur, Blais, Freeston, & Dugas, 1998; Ladouceur et al., 1999). Accordingly, Ladouceur et al. (1999) have concluded that poor problem orientation is a broadly specific GAD process variable not shared by other anxiety disorders.

The present study attempted to extend or improve upon the previous research in three important ways. First, we used a new multi-dimensional measure of social problem-solving ability, namely, the Social Problem-Solving Inventory-Revised (SPSI-R; D’Zurilla, Nezu, & Maydeu-Olivares, 2001), which assesses dimensions of social problem-solving ability that have not yet been examined. Most of the previous studies in this area used the original theory-driven Social Problem-Solving Inventory (SPSI; D’Zurilla & Nezu, 1990), which consists of two major scales that were designed to measure problem orientation and problem-solving proper, defined as the knowledge and use of effective problem-solving skills. However, recent factor-analytic studies (Maydeu-Olivares & D’Zurilla, 1995, 1996) have found that the SPSI is actually measuring two different problem orientation dimensions (positive problem orientation and negative problem

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