



Research paper

Attentional control mediates the effect of social anxiety on positive affect[☆]

Amanda S. Morrison, Richard G. Heimberg*

Psychology Department, Temple University, United States

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the present studies was to examine whether attentional control, a self-regulatory attentional mechanism, mediates the effect of social anxiety on positive affect. We tested this mediation in two studies using undergraduate students selected to represent a broad range of severity of social anxiety. Self-report assessments of social anxiety, attentional control, and positive affect were collected in a cross-sectional design (Study 1) and in a longitudinal design with three assessment points (Study 2). Results of both studies supported the hypothesized mediational model. Specifically, social anxiety was inversely related to attentional control, which itself positively predicted positive affect. This mediation remained significant even when statistically controlling for the effects of depression. Additionally, the hypothesized model provided superior model fit to theoretically-grounded equivalent models in both studies. Implications of these findings for understanding diminished positive affect in social anxiety are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Although the wealth of research on social anxiety concerns the distress and impairment associated with and caused by excessive social anxiety, accumulating evidence suggests that social anxiety is also associated with diminished positive, healthy functioning (for a review, see Kashdan, Weeks, & Savostyanova, 2011). Given that the absence of psychological distress is not necessarily equivalent to psychological health and that research supports the distinction between positive and negative affect as two negatively correlated yet independent factors (e.g., Diener, Larsen, Levine, & Emmons, 1985; Watson, Gamez, & Simms, 2005), it is important to understand the mechanisms through which social anxiety leads to reduced positive affective states. Such knowledge has the ability to inform treatment innovations that target the enhancement of the psychological health and well-being of individuals with excessive social anxiety.

Whereas the study of low positive affectivity in depression has flourished, research on positive affectivity in the anxiety disorders has lagged. Recently, however, studies have shown associations between social anxiety and low positive affect. For example, individuals with social anxiety disorder (SAD) estimate positive events

to be less likely to occur and anticipate experiencing more frequent and negative reactions to positive social events than non-anxious individuals (Gilboa-Schechtman, Franklin, & Foa, 2000). Other evidence comes from the finding that, despite improvement, post-treatment quality of life among individuals with SAD fails to reach the normal range (Eng, Coles, Heimberg, & Safren, 2001, 2005; Safren, Heimberg, Brown, & Holle, 1997). Elevated trait social anxiety in nonclinical samples has also exhibited a relationship with reduced positive affect and fewer positive events in everyday life (e.g., Kashdan, 2002; Kashdan & Steger, 2006).

Further evidence supports the notion that the relationship between social anxiety and reduced positive affect cannot be attributed entirely to co-occurring depressive symptoms. For example, SAD has been associated with diminished positive affect after statistically controlling for the contribution of depressive symptoms (Brown, Chorpita, & Barlow, 1998). Similarly, in a study of the tripartite model of anxiety and depression in individuals with SAD, social anxiety was more closely related to the low positive affect factor of the model than the physiological hyperarousal factor (Hughes et al., 2006). A recent meta-analysis also supported the finding of reduced positive affect across the social anxiety spectrum after statistically accounting for the variance contributed by depressive symptoms (Kashdan, 2007).

Given that the finding of reduced positive affect in social anxiety persists after conservatively controlling for depressive symptoms (i.e., the shared variance between these two highly related constructs is removed; Kashdan, 2007; Miller & Chapman, 2001), several explanations have been offered to understand this finding. Although individual differences exist in how people respond to positive affect, many people use strategies to enhance and sustain

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* Corresponding author at: Adult Anxiety Clinic, Department of Psychology, Temple University, 1701 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122-6085. Tel.: +1 215 204 1575; fax: +1 215 204 5184.

E-mail address: heimberg@temple.edu (R.G. Heimberg).

positive affective states. However, social anxiety has been associated with fear of positive emotions (Turk, Heimberg, Luterek, Mennin, & Fresco, 2005). Thus, it is not surprising that individuals with SAD exhibit tendencies to down-regulate its experience and expression. Specifically, socially anxious individuals exhibit lower expression of positive emotions than do non-anxious individuals (Turk et al., 2005) and do not exploit opportunities to pursue activities that could generate positive affect (Kashdan & Steger, 2006). Social anxiety is also associated with dampening of positive affect and reduced tendencies to savor positive affect (Eisner, Johnson, & Carver, 2009).

Evidence also supports the notion that social anxiety is associated with fears of positive evaluation, an outcome that psychologically healthy individuals would likely conceptualize as a positive affect enhancing experience. The core feature of SAD is typically described as the fear of negative evaluation by others. In contrast, fear of positive evaluation is defined as “the sense of dread associated with being evaluated favorably and publicly, which necessitates a direct social comparison of the self to others and therefore causes an individual to feel conspicuous and ‘in the spotlight’” (Weeks, Jakatdar, & Heimberg, 2010, p. 69; see also Weeks, Heimberg, & Rodebaugh, 2008; Weeks, Heimberg, Rodebaugh, & Norton, 2008). This perspective is in line with evidence that socially anxious individuals worry that positive evaluation of their performance raises the social standards by which they will be evaluated in the future, although they do not believe that their typical performance will change for the better (Alden, Mellings, & Laposa, 2004; Wallace & Alden, 1995, 1997). As a result, they predict that positive evaluation by others will ultimately result in failure. Nevertheless, fear of positive evaluation contributes unique variance to the prediction of social anxiety and thus does not appear to be only a delayed expression of the fear of negative evaluation (Weeks, Heimberg, & Rodebaugh, 2008; Weeks, Heimberg, Rodebaugh, & Norton, 2008).

Despite an increase in the evidence for the tendency of socially anxious individuals to fear and avoid positive emotional experiences, including positive evaluation by others, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the mechanisms through which social anxiety leads to diminished positive affect. Therefore, the aim of the present studies was to examine a potential mediational variable, namely attentional control, in the relationship between social anxiety and diminished positive affect.

Attention is a complex collection of cognitive mechanisms, one of which is executive attention (e.g., Fan & Posner, 2004; Posner & Petersen, 1990; Posner & Rothbart, 2007). Executive attention refers to various mechanisms involved in the monitoring and resolving of conflict among cognitions, emotions, and behavioral responses (Posner & Rothbart, 2007). Attentional control is a somewhat newer construct that is purported to be one such mechanism in the executive system. Attentional control refers to a general capacity to effortfully regulate attention (i.e., voluntarily focus or shift attention) in comparison to less voluntary, reactive dimensions of attention (Derryberry & Rothbart, 1988). There is emerging evidence that social anxiety is associated with reduced attentional control, even after partialling out other negative emotions such as depression and state anxiety (Moriya & Tanno, 2008).

At least two lines of research converge to describe how attentional control may mediate the effect of social anxiety on positive affect. Though the two literatures emphasize different aspects of the sequelae of reduced attentional control, both conceptualize the depletion of self-regulatory resources as a factor contributing to diminished positive affect. Attentional control has been conceptualized as a subcomponent process of the self-regulation system (e.g., Rueda, Posner, & Rothbart, 2004). The first line of support comes from research demonstrating that reduced self-regulatory processing can negatively impact interpersonal behavior, thereby

decreasing the likelihood of positive social experiences (for review, see Kashdan, 2007). Given that (1) people have a limited supply of self-regulatory resources (e.g., Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), (2) social activity is ubiquitous in the lives of socially anxious individuals, and (3) concerns of those with excessive social anxiety occur prior to, during, and following social interactions, these resources become depleted. A series of studies by Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco (2005) shows that depleted self-regulatory functioning can negatively affect one's ability to effectively engage in impression management. Moreover, Vohs et al. found that effortful impression management impairs self control in successive demanding tasks. Kashdan (2007; Kashdan et al., 2011) proposes that there exists a paradox in social anxiety in which excessive attempts to make a positive impression, appear and feel less anxious, and avoid rejection deplete the self-control resources necessary to effectively prevent socially undesirable behaviors (e.g., inappropriately self-disclosing intimate details, being unresponsive to the feelings and interests of social interaction partners; e.g., Gross, 1998; Vohs et al., 2005). The outcome of this paradox is that the likelihood of a positive interpersonal outcome is decreased. This outcome, taken together with the finding that the most distinguishing characteristic of very happy people is the existence of satisfying social interactions and relationships (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Myers & Diener, 1995), highlights the eventual outcome of reduced positive affect in social anxiety.

A second line of converging evidence to explain how attentional control may mediate the effect of social anxiety on positive affect comes from the information processing literature. In contrast to non-anxious individuals, socially anxious individuals preferentially allocate their attention to social threat information in the environment (e.g., Asmundson & Stein, 1994; Mogg, Philippot, & Bradley, 2004; Pishyar, Harris, & Menzies, 2004). Evidence also suggests that this bias toward negative information may be accompanied by a bias away from positive information (e.g., Chen, Ehlers, Clark, & Mansell, 2002; Mansell, Clark, Ehlers, & Chen, 1999; Pishyar et al., 2004; see also Perowne & Mansell, 2002; Veljaca & Rapee, 1998). In addition, the tendency to allocate attention away from positive social stimuli mediates the effect of social anxiety on change in state anxiety in response to a social stressor, implicating the role of diminished processing of positive social information in the persistence of social anxiety (Taylor, Bomyea, & Amir, 2010). Preferential biases toward threat have received some empirical support as a causal factor in the maintenance of excessive social anxiety (e.g., Amir et al., 2009). In contrast, attending to positive information serves as a protective factor against stress (Joormann, Talbot, & Gotlib, 2007) and may promote adaptive emotion regulation under conditions of high stress (Lee & Telch, 2008). Moreover, Taylor, Bomyea, and Amir (2011) provide initial support for the notion that training of attention toward positive information may heighten positive emotional reactivity, thus implying a causal relationship between attention toward positive information and positive affectivity.

As noted above, the attentional control system is part of the executive system that carries out more voluntary attentional functions as opposed to the more reactive, stimulus-driven attentional system (Derryberry & Rothbart, 1988). In anxiety, impairment in the attentional control system is purported to lead to an increase in the influence of the stimulus-driven attentional system and a decrease in the influence of the goal-directed attentional system, contributing to the capture of attentional resources by threat-relevant stimuli (Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007). Such capture may combine with risk for anxiety, for example in the form of negative affectivity and neuroticism (Lonigan & Phillips, 2001) or parental factors such as modeling of fear (for review, see Hadwin, Garner, & Perez-Olivas, 2006; Volbrecht & Goldsmith, 2010), to lead to the development of excessive anxiety. Although

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