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When the heat is on: Romantic partner responses influence distress in socially anxious women

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Abstract

This study provided a preliminary test of whether socially anxious women and their partners would show more negative social support behavior, especially among those with low relationship satisfaction, and whether this would increase the distress of the socially anxious women. Women with ($n = 22$) and without ($n = 23$) heightened social anxiety were observed interacting with their partners under a social-evaluative threat and support behaviors were coded. Unexpectedly, no differences were found between socially and non-socially anxious women and their partners. Although relationship satisfaction influenced this process, it was the more satisfied women who showed more negative behavior. Additionally, the more positive behaviors the partner exhibited, the greater was the distress reported by socially anxious women, particularly among women whose partners reported high relationship satisfaction. Implications for how these findings might expand theories on interpersonal processes in social anxiety are discussed.

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Introduction

Social anxiety (SA) is a prevalent condition that falls on a continuum, with social anxiety disorder (SAD) at the extreme (Heimberg, Dodge, & Becker, 1987; Kessler et al., 1994). People with moderate to extreme levels of SA experience considerable social impairment (Davidson, Hughes, George, & Blazer, 1994; Schneier, et al., 1994). Still, many do form close relationships (albeit fewer relative to people without SA; Schneier et al., 1994). Despite this, little is known about functioning in the relationships of people with SA. Are they impaired? If so, in what ways? In this study, we focus on romantic relationships of women high and low in SA, in a preliminary effort to examine whether SA influences interpersonal processes in close relationships.

Much of our knowledge about interpersonal behaviors of people with SA comes from studies using structured role-play and related behavioral assessments (McNeil, Reis, & Turk, 1995), which document anxious, submissive, and avoidant behaviors in stranger interactions (e.g., Leary, Knight, & Johnson, 1987; Schlenker, 1987; Walters & Hope, 1998). This limits our understanding of interpersonal functioning and SA, as behavior in close relationships easily may differ from behavior with unknown others. As Alden (2001) suggests, the behavior of people with SA is strategic—it changes depending on whether they are trying to avoid negative evaluation or maintain closeness (see also Leary & Kowalski, 1995; Schlenker & Leary, 1982), the latter of which may be more prominent in close relationships than in stranger relationships. Data also attest to the presence of behaviors in close relationships that are not typically seen in stranger interactions, particularly dependent behaviors (e.g., Bruch, Rivet, Heimberg, Hunt & McIntosh, 1999; Darcy, Davila, & Beck, 2005). To date, one study has examined communication among people high and low in SA and their romantic partners, using structured conversations, and found that people with high SA displayed more negative communication behaviors, particularly during discussion of relationship problems (Wenzel, Graff-Dolezal, Macho, & Brendle, 2005). Although intriguing, these findings are preliminary and warrant greater study.

In this study, we focused on women high and low in SA and how they relate with their romantic partner when facing a social-evaluative threat. We focused on social support behaviors, defined as how partners help each other cope with a difficult situation unrelated to their relationship (Pasch, Bradbury, & Sullivan, 1997). The ability of partners to seek and provide support is one of the foundations of adaptive couple functioning and one of the best predictors of relationship satisfaction and stability (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Skills necessary for adaptive support behavior are likely to be impaired by SA in the individual and couple. Social avoidance might result in lack of support seeking by the anxious person. Alternatively, dependence might result in excessive support seeking or over-reliance on the partner. Partners of anxious women who are poor at seeking support may behave, in turn, negatively, possibly recoiling from or being annoyed by excessive support seeking, or being intrusive or controlling in the face of avoidance. As such, support behaviors seem a likely candidate for the manifestation of SA in the interactions of romantic couples.

We focused on women with and without high SA, given that SAD is more prevalent in women (Kessler et al., 1994). They were asked to prepare a talk that would be videotaped and later rated. While preparing the talk, the couple was secretly videotaped. Three hypotheses were tested, although we recognized that these were speculative owing to the lack of prior studies on this topic. First, socially anxious females and their partners were expected to show more negative support

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