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THEORETICAL ARTICLE

# Déjà Vu All Over Again: Critical Misunderstandings Concerning Anxiety Sensitivity and Constructive Suggestions for Future Research

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**Abstract**—The debate concerning the relation between anxiety sensitivity (AS) and trait anxiety has been constructive for the field and has suggested a number of important directions for future research. Reiss' (1997) commentary on AS and trait anxiety in this journal, however, contains several serious factual misstatements and logical errors that confuse, rather than clarify, many of the central issues in this debate. These misunderstandings are corrected and the implications of the issues raised by Reiss are addressed here. The authors suggest that future research on AS (a) embed this construct within the context of broader temperamental and personality variables and (b) explicitly recognize the bidirectionality of emotional and cognitive influences. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd

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As a number of philosophers of science (e.g., Bartley, 1984; Popper, 1965) have noted, science at its best involves the maximization of criticism. In other words, scientific progress occurs when new concepts are subjected to searching and often intense scrutiny, and either emerge intact or require abandonment or modification. Thus, debate and controversy, so long as they are *ad rem* rather than *ad hominem*, are healthy for science and should be actively encouraged (see Kendrick & Funder, 1988).

In this context, the debate regarding the relation between trait anxiety and anxiety sensitivity (AS), a cognitive construct reflecting individual differences in beliefs concerning the harmful consequences of anxiety, has been constructive for the field (e.g., Lilienfeld, Turner, & Jacob, 1993; McNally, 1996; S. Taylor, 1995). In this debate, we raised the question of whether AS and trait anxiety are entirely distinct or independent constructs, and contended that the incremental validity of AS above and beyond trait anxiety required closer examination (Lilienfeld, Jacob, & Turner, 1989; Lilienfeld et al., 1993). In addition, we argued that a number of early findings relating AS to anxiety disorders were potentially attributable to the effects of trait anxiety and similar unmeasured variables (see Lilienfeld et al., 1989).

This debate now appears to have run its course. There is a consensus that AS, as operationalized by the Anxiety Sensitivity Index (ASI; Reiss, Peterson, Gursky, & McNally, 1986), correlates moderately with trait anxiety, although it contributes to the prediction of certain phenomena (e.g., panic attacks; anxiety responses to challenge procedures; McNally, 1989, 1996; cf. Brown & Cash, 1990) above and beyond trait anxiety. Like many controversies, this debate has clarified several important issues and suggested novel avenues for future research. For example, this debate has pushed researchers to examine the extent to which AS possesses incremental validity above and beyond trait anxiety in the prediction of anxiety disorders, including panic disorder (see McNally, 1996, for a review), and has spawned the development of new models of the relation between AS and trait anxiety. For example, Lilienfeld et al. (1993) (see also S. Taylor, 1995; Zinbarg, Barlow, and Brown, 1997) posited a hierarchical model in which AS is conceptualized as a lower-order facet of a higher-order trait anxiety construct. In addition, researchers are beginning to examine the extent to which AS is associated with personality dimensions related to trait anxiety, such as self-consciousness and other facets of neuroticism, as well to dimensions that are largely independent of trait anxiety, such as introversion and absorption (Borger, Cox, Feuntes, & Ross, 1996; Lilienfeld, 1997).

In a recent commentary in this journal, Reiss (1997) sharply took us to task for a number of criticisms and questions that we have raised concerning the conceptualization and measurement of AS. Reiss' comments appear to represent an attempt to prolong the AS-trait anxiety debate by reviving several straw-person issues that have long since been settled. In the present article, we argue that Reiss' commentary does not represent a constructive contribution to this

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