



## A multilevel analysis of the self-presentation theory of social anxiety: Contextualized, dispositional, and interactive perspectives <sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

According to self-presentation theory, social anxiety is determined by impression motivation and impression efficacy. However, researchers have not evaluated the theory's applicability from contextual and dispositional perspectives in an integrated manner, nor have they examined a fundamental interactive facet of the theory. In three studies, we examined these issues using hypothetical situations and experience sampling methodology. Results demonstrated the theory's applicability at the contextual and dispositional level, providing insight into people's general tendencies to experience social anxiety and their momentary experiences of social anxiety. Results also revealed the predicted interaction between impression motivation and impression efficacy – high impression efficacy weakens the association between impression motivation and social anxiety. These studies expand understanding of the personal and situational factors that drive social anxiety.

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### 1. Introduction

At both clinical and non-clinical levels, social anxiety has important psychological and interpersonal consequences. In an effort to understand and manage people's anxiety in social encounters, psychologists have examined social anxiety from various biological, social, developmental, motivational, and cognitive perspectives. From the perspectives of personality and social psychology, the self-presentation theory of social anxiety highlights two factors affecting social anxiety – one's motivation to create specific impressions in others and one's perceptions of efficacy in doing so (Leary & Kowalski, 1995; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). According to self-presentation theory, social anxiety results from high levels of impression motivation and low levels of impression efficacy.

In the current studies, we examine two issues regarding social anxiety and the self-presentation theory of social anxiety. First, we evaluate the self-presentation theory of social anxiety from a within-person and between-person perspective, examining impression motivation and impression efficacy simultaneously as predictors. Second, we examine a facet of the theory that has not

yet been reported in the literature, specifically a proposed interactive effect of impression motivation and impression efficacy on social anxiety. These issues have implications for the understanding of social anxiety and for an integration of contextualized and dispositional perspectives on psychology more broadly.

#### 1.1. Self-presentation theory of social anxiety

According to the general view of self-presentation theory, much of what we do and how we feel arises from the interpersonal impressions we wish to create. Social life is related to the impressions that people form of one another and the ways in which they react to those impressions. Therefore, people often try to control the impression they make on others, a process known as self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary, 1995).

Social anxiety involves worry regarding social evaluation; therefore, it can be conceptualized as a perceived self-presentational problem (Leary & Buckley, 2000; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). As such, it is triggered when individuals are motivated to convey a particular impression – usually one that will facilitate interpersonal acceptance (or perhaps more accurately, to avoid interpersonal rejection) but doubt their ability to do so. Individuals who are highly motivated to avoid rejection and secure acceptance are predisposed to social anxiety.

More formally, a self-presentational perspective (Leary, 1983; Leary & Kowalski, 1995) suggests that social anxiety (SA) is characterized by two components: impression motivation (IM)

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and perceived probability of self-presentational success (or impression efficacy, IE), as reflected in the following model:

$$SA = IM \times (1 - IE)$$

Impression motivation (IM) is the degree to which a person desires to make specific impressions. According to self-presentation theory, social anxiety occurs when an individual feels that the consequences of self-presentations are important. To the degree an individual cares about a social presentation, he or she is likely to experience social anxiety. Previous research has found evidence of an association between impression motivation and social anxiety (e.g., DePaulo, Epstein, & LeMay, 1990; Reno & Kenny, 1992). For example, Reno and Kenny (1992) examined the relationship between social anxiety and propensity to self-disclose. Participants were asked to participate in a discussion in which they evaluated their own amount of self-disclosure and were also rated by other participants in a group. Highly anxious individuals were more concerned than less anxious individuals about the impression they were making on group members and also tried to control this impression. Because socially anxious individuals were concerned about the impressions they were making, these results are consistent with the idea that socially anxious people are motivated to manage the impression they make on others.

Impression efficacy (IE), the cognitive self-presentational component of social anxiety, is one's estimation of the subjective probability of actually making a desired impression. According to self-presentation theory, social anxiety occurs when people believe that they are not able to present themselves in a particular way. To the degree that people perceive themselves as lacking such efficacy, they are likely to experience social anxiety. Indeed, several studies have supported the proposed link between social anxiety and impression efficacy or self-perceived interpersonal ability (e.g., Leary, Atherton, Hill, & Hur, 1986). For instance, Maddux, Norton, and Leary (1988) used a "hypothetical social situation" procedure in which participants read (and listened to) brief descriptions of social situations and reported the presentational efficacy and social anxiety that they would likely experience in each situation. Each situation reflected an encounter that focused on an interpersonal problem and a way in which a social goal could be achieved. As expected, results revealed that high levels of social anxiety were associated with low self-presentational efficacy. That is, participants who anticipated an inability to handle the social situations were likely to anticipate high social anxiety.

### 1.2. Contextualized and dispositional effects in the self-presentation model of social anxiety

In principle, the self-presentation model of social anxiety might be applied from either a contextualized perspective or a dispositional perspective. From a contextualized or within-person perspective, a momentary experience of social anxiety might arise from a momentary state of motivation to create specific impressions and/or a momentary state of poor impression efficacy. From a dispositional or between-person perspective, stable individual differences in the tendency to experience social anxiety (across contexts) might be associated with stable individual differences in the tendencies to be motivated to be seen in particular ways and to experience a lack of efficacy in doing so.

Despite the potential applicability of the self-presentation model from the contextualized and dispositional perspectives, previous research generally focuses on only one perspective at a time. Further, to our knowledge, previous research has never examined the two factors (impression motivation and impression efficacy) simultaneously as predictors of social anxiety, much less in a way that operationalizes them in a comparable way. The current research seeks to address this gap in the literature by providing

evidence that impression motivation and impression efficacy indeed both operate as independent predictors of social anxiety. For example, the research by Maddux et al. (1988) focused on the effect of presentational efficacy on social anxiety using a between-person perspective. Although the "hypothetical social situation" procedure used by Maddux and his colleagues provided situation-by-situation information (i.e., affording a within-person-oriented analysis), their primary research questions were focused on individual differences. Thus, Maddux et al. aggregated participants' responses across situations, focusing on the between-person level of analysis rather than the within-person level. Therefore, the research provided important information about only one level of analysis. More generally, the literature has not systematically compared contextualized and dispositional manifestations of social anxiety in general nor the self-presentation model in particular.

A systematic examination of the self-presentation model of social anxiety from both contextualized and dispositional perspectives has important theoretical implications. First, it provides insight into social anxiety as primarily contextual or primarily dispositional in nature. That is, it allows us to compare variability in social anxiety across two important psychosocial levels – either as a phenomenon that ebbs and flows dramatically across situations (for most people) or as a phenomenon that differs dramatically between people (regardless of contextual forces). Most, if not all, people might experience social anxiety in some situations but not in others, suggesting that social anxiety is heavily affected by contextual factors. However, there also seems to be dramatic differences between people, in terms of their tendency to experience social anxiety, and this suggests that social anxiety might heavily reflect dispositional factors. To our knowledge, only one study has provided relevant evidence regarding this comparison. Nezlek and Leary (2002) examined participants' daily-life experience of several important social variables, including the degree of nervousness or tension that was experienced in social interactions. Results showed that 76% of the variance in daily life experiences of social anxiety arose from the ebb and flow of social anxiety that people experienced from one situation to another, whereas 24% seemed to be related to differences in people's general tendency to experience social anxiety (see Nezlek & Leary, 2002, Table 2). Such results suggest that social anxiety might have a larger contextual component than a dispositional component. To our knowledge, this important finding has not been replicated, and thus its generalizability and validity is unknown. More broadly, recent research indicates that within-person variability can differ substantially from between-person variability for some important psychological characteristics (Fleeson, 2001, 2007b). To more fully understand social anxiety as a psychological characteristic, we must understand the degree to which it varies from person to person and from situation to situation in common daily experiences.

The multi-level examination of the self-presentation model of social anxiety is important also because the model might apply at only one psychosocial level. That is, a systematic, multi-level examination would reveal any differential applicability of the theory to the two levels of the phenomenon, revealing whether the causal mechanisms operating at one level of social anxiety operate to the same degree (if at all) at the other. Indeed, the processes generating an individual's situation-to-situation experience of a psychological phenomenon such as social anxiety might differ from the processes generating reliable differences among individuals' general level of social anxiety (Fleeson, 2007a; Furr & Huelsman, 2003). For example, the motivational and cognitive mechanisms (impression motivation, impression efficacy) within the self-presentation model might more strongly determine individuals' situation-to-situation experience of social anxiety than individuals' dispositional experience of social anxiety. The use of

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