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The effects of impression management demands on heart rate, self-reported social anxiety, and social competence in undergraduate males

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Abstract

The effects of self-presentation demands were evaluated through conversational probe (CP) role-play tasks. Participants ($N=29$) were required to manage their self-presentations (i.e., the impression they made, in each of two conditions). During high impression management (IM) demand, participants were evaluated on their performance. During Low IM demand, participants evaluated a confederate's performance. The High IM demand condition produced significantly higher heart rate (HR) and self-reported anxiety. HR and self-reported anxiety accounted for a significant amount of the variance in criterion measures of social competence. Greater social competence during High IM was associated with higher HR. Greater social competence during Low IM was associated with lower HR and lower self-reported anxiety. Although preliminary, these results suggest that uncontrolled IM demands contributed to mixed results found within and between social anxiety studies in the literature. Implications for the treatment of social anxiety are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Few studies have simultaneously assessed relationships among self-reported social anxiety, physiological arousal, and social competence in different social

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situations. Using a variety of measures and a variety of social interaction tasks, have been assessed relationships among subsets of these variables with inconsistent results (Beidel, Turner, & Dancu, 1985; Cook, Melamed, Cuthbert, McNeil, & Lang, 1988; Dogde, Hope, Heimberg, & Becker, 1988; Glass & Arnkoff, 1989, 1994; Lang, Cuthbert, & Bradley, 1998; Turner & Beidel, 1985). Consequently, the roles of self-reported social anxiety, physiology, and social competence remains unclear.

Recently, Strahan and Conger (1998) found high levels of self-reported social anxiety to have no detrimental effects on participants' performances. High levels of social anxiety are often assumed to be correlated with high levels of physiological arousal. These results conflict with the prevailing performance deficit model (Gibbons, 1991; Hope, Gransler, & Heimberg, 1989; Ingram, 1990). However, social situations often have different self-presentation demands (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). No studies have as yet assessed these variables while controlling for the effects of self-presentation or impression management (IM) demands. IM demands may be key to understanding the inconsistent results found both within and between social anxiety studies.

The relationship between social anxiety and social competence is in need of conceptual and empirical work (McNeil, Reis, & Turk, 1995). The performance deficit model predicts that high anxiety impairs performance. Many assume that socially anxious persons are socially inept (Hope et al., 1989; Strahan & Conger, 1998). Social competence in socially anxious persons is thought to suffer due to the demands of increased self-focused attention, increased physiological arousal, and/or aroused affect (Gibbons, 1991; Hope et al., 1989; Ingram, 1990; Strahan & Conger, 1998). Physiological arousal and situational context play a role in the relationship between social anxiety and social competence, but this role is not fully understood.

Empirical findings relative to the relationship between social anxiety and social competence are mixed both within and between studies. Modest support has been found for the assertion that people with social anxiety show impaired social competence (Beidel et al., 1985; Clark & Arkowitz, 1975; Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993; Strahan & Conger, 1998). This relationship varies by social task (e.g. impromptu speech task, heterosexual social interaction, etc.) (Beidel et al., 1985). Self-focused attention appears to be detrimental only if participants already lacked confidence in their social abilities (Burgio, Merluzzi, & Pryor, 1986). Although participants in Strahan and Conger's (1998) study displayed degrees of social anxiety equivalent to that found in social phobics, they showed no deficits in social competence.

The evidence in support for social competence deficits in socially anxious persons is primarily based on males engaged in heterosexual social interactions. Nevertheless, these studies have all assessed social competence behaviors differently. Some used global ratings (e.g., a single rating to describe overall performance) (Beidel et al., 1985). Some used different sets of molecular behaviors (e.g., head-nodding, standing erect, gaze-aversion, eye contact, etc.)

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