



Social anxiety in late adolescence: The importance of early childhood language impairment

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Received 31 May 2005; received in revised form 14 December 2005; accepted 21 January 2006

Abstract

Social phobia is a common, highly comorbid, poorly understood and relatively understudied condition. The origins of social phobia share familial and biological features common with those of other anxiety disorders, but seldom have precursors of the *fear of social communication* been examined as a possible pathway to social phobia. Here we examine the role of early childhood language impairment as an antecedent to social phobia in late adolescence. Participants in a prospective longitudinal community study identified as having language impairment at age 5 and matched controls were followed up at age 19. Compared to normal language controls, individuals with a history of early language impairment had 2.7 times the odds of having a social phobia by age 19. Results suggest that early language impairment represents a distinct pathway to late adolescent social phobia.

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Keywords: Language impairment; Social phobia; Comorbidity; Language; Longitudinal study; Predictors

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1. Introduction

Epidemiological studies have identified social phobia as a common disorder among children, adolescents, and adults, with general population estimates of lifetime prevalence ranging from 1% to 13% (Benjamin, Costello, & Warren, 1990; Furmark, 2002; Kessler et al., 1994; Verhulst, Van der Ende, Ferdinand, & Kasius, 1997). Individuals with social phobia are at risk for considerable morbidity and impairment. Comorbidity includes a 3.5 times increased risk for depression with associated greater severity and persistence of depression (Stein et al., 2001). Social phobia is also associated with other anxiety disorders, substance use disorders and smoking and nicotine dependence (Carrigan & Randall, 2003; Kessler et al., 1994; Sonntag, Wittchen, Höfler, Kessler, & Stein, 2000). Significant impairments in various domains include poor academic performance and early school drop out (Beidel, 1991; Last, Hersen, Kazdin, Orvaschel, & Perrin, 1991; Stein, Torgrud, & Walker, 2000). Distress and avoidance of social interaction contribute to impairment in social functioning and an increased sense of social isolation. Socially anxious youth report lower levels of perceived acceptance and support from peers (La Greca & Lopez, 1998) and demonstrate social skill deficits relative to non-anxious youth (Spence, Donovan, & Brechman-Toussaint, 1999).

Despite the commonality of social phobia and an increased awareness of the seriousness of this disorder, the etiology of social phobia is poorly understood. In part, clarifying the development of social phobia may depend on our understanding of the nature of the disorder. For instance, social phobia viewed as a subtype of anxiety disorder would be expected to share similar roots and course with other anxiety disorders. However, evidence suggests that a cognitive bias leading to fear of social communication may be unique to social phobia (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Wilson & Rapee, 2005). Specifically, individuals with social anxiety in comparison to non-anxious individuals may overestimate the likelihood that negative outcomes and negative consequences will occur in social situations (Foa, Franklin, Perry, & Herbert, 1996; Gilboa-Schechtman, Franklin, & Foa, 2000). Therefore, in addition to common developmental pathways shared with other anxiety disorders, there may be unique developmental pathways to social phobia.

Social anxiety arising through maladaptive interpretation of social events would seem to be, at least in part, associated with real or perceived difficulties in social interaction. Surprisingly, the issue of difficulties in interpersonal communication, such as would occur among those with language impairments, has been virtually neglected in the social anxiety literature. Children with language impairment exhibit communication deficits that may put them at an increased risk of developing anxiety around social interactions. A growing body of evidence has revealed that children with language impairment have numerous difficulties in their interactions with peers. Often, these children are not active participants in social interactions in school. Language impaired children have

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