Social anxiety is related to dominance but not to affiliation as perceived by self and others: A real-life investigation into the psychobiological perspective on social anxiety

Corine Dijk⁎, Arnold A.P. van Emmerik, Raoul P.P.P. Grasman

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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A B S T R A C T
From a biopsychological perspective, social anxiety can be seen as a proneness to act submissively in order to reduce conflict and avoid rejection by others. Research into this framework so far specifically focused on the self-perceived social world. Less is known about the relation between social anxiety and one’s actual position within a group, as perceived by group members. In addition, research to date showed that social anxiety seems related to social rejection after short interactions, but it is not known if social anxiety affects affiliation ratings after more prolonged interactions. Therefore, the current study tested if social anxiety is related to lower dominance and affiliation ratings by self and others in groups that exist for longer periods of time. Seventy-six participants from eight groups rated themselves and their group members on the dimensions of dominance and affiliation. The results showed that social anxiety was negatively related to dominance but not to affiliation. These results indicate that it is necessary to investigate social evaluations of individuals with social anxiety in more naturalistic and less structured settings. Also, the results hint that it might be worthwhile to investigate if specific safety behaviors are related to lower dominance ratings by others.

1. Introduction

From a biopsychological perspective, social anxiety can be seen as a mode for dealing with social threat (for extensive reviews see Gilbert, 2000, 2001; Gilboa-Schechtman, Shachar, & Helpman, 2014; Trower & Gilbert, 1989; Weeks, Heimberg, & Heuer, 2011; Öhman, 1986). Particularly, humans have a fundamental need to belong and form attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Social life is full of perils however, and this need to belong can be threatened easily. For instance, when people bully, reject or exclude each other (Gilbert, 2001). To avoid this, in the course of human evolution, people developed a motivational affective schema that prevents jeopardizing the relationships with others (e.g., Gilbert, 2001; Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014). This more automatic system allows individuals to monitor to what extend they are being accepted or rejected. In individuals with social anxiety disorder however, this functional mechanism allegedly has derailed and become maladaptive (Gilbert, 2001). For instance, there is evidence that socially anxious individuals are extremely attuned to signals of social threat (e.g., Gilboa-Schechtman, Foa, & Amir, 1999; Joormann & Gotlib, 2006). The motivational affective schema that socially anxious individuals overuse consists of beliefs about hierarchy and conflict.

That is, according to Trower and Gilbert (1989), socially anxious individuals overuse an ‘agonic mode’ in which the social world is perceived as hierarchical and conflictual, and converse a ‘hedonic mode’ which includes affective schema’s of communion, safety, agreeableness and warmth (e.g., Aderka, Weisman, Shahar, & Gilboa-Schechtman, 2009; Alden, Wiggins, & Pincus, 1990; Gilboa-Schechtman et al., 2014; Hope, Sigler, Penn, & Meier, 1998; Leary, 1957; Wiggins, 1979).

Within the agonic mode, humans tend to compete for status and approval. Effectively striving for a high status within a group requires that an individual believes that he or she has added value for that group and that others will recognize that value (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009a; Anderson & Kilduff, 2009b). Thus, to obtain a dominant position it is at least as important to signal competence as to actually be competent (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009b). Individuals with social anxiety disorder however, tend to perceive themselves as not being competent enough and are not inclined to signal any competences that they may nevertheless feel they have (e.g., Alden & Wallace, 1991; Creed & Funder, 1998; Hofmann, 2007; Hope et al., 1998). Thus, socially anxious individuals tend to view themselves as subordinate to others (Berger, Keshet, & Gilboa-Schechtman, 2017; Gilbert, 2000, 2001; Russell et al., 2011; Weeks et al., 2011). For socially anxious individuals, the...
alternative is therefore to signal signs of appeasement and submissiveness to avoid conflict and rejection by others. Studies indeed showed that socially anxious individuals wish to avoid conflict and easily take blame for social mishaps (Davila & Beck, 2002; Trower, Sherling, Beech, Harrop, & Gilbert, 1998).

Importantly, research so far has specifically focused on the self-perceived social world and one’s relation to that world, and has not clarified if socially anxious individuals in reality occupy more subordinate positions within a group. The latter situation carries important clinical implications however, and it is therefore important to consider this possibility (e.g., Trower et al., 1998). For example, it might be more useful to strengthen a socially anxious individual’s self-presentation using skills training, than to treat his or her self-perceived subordinate position as a dysfunctional cognition in cognitive therapy.

There is reason to assume that signaling submissiveness will indeed lead to lower dominance within a social group. In line with the self-beliefs of socially anxious individuals, many of the (safety) behaviors that are characteristic for social anxiety can be seen as submissive behavior. For example, socially anxious individuals more often avert their gaze, collapse their posture or raise the pitch of their voice (Weeks et al., 2011; Weeks, Howell, & Goldin, 2013). This concurs with findings that socially anxious individuals are actually perceived as less dominant by their friends, but also by strangers after short experimental interaction tasks (Creed & Funder, 1998; Oakman, Gifford, & Chlebowski, 2003; Rodebaugh et al., 2014; Walters & Hope, 1998). However, anxious and non-anxious participants could not be distinguished in terms of dominance in other studies (Hope et al., 1998).

Thus, these results suggest that social anxiety, perhaps through submissive behavior, might also be related to lower actual dominance within a group.

Only very few studies examined this possible relation between actual social rank and social anxiety however. Walters and Inderbitzen (1998) asked 1179 high school students to rate their classmates on characteristics such as ‘best leader’ or ‘easiest to push around’. A strength of this study was that in contrast to most research, real-life groups where being investigated to test this relation, since the psychobiological framework specifically focusses on social anxiety in existing groups. The results indicated that students that were classified as submissive reported greater social anxiety than those classified as cooperative, friendly-dominant, or hostile-dominant. Although this indicates that lower dominance within a group is related to social anxiety, a number of important questions remain. For instance, the study was conducted with high school adolescents and it remains to be seen if the same results can be found in older, more mature samples. Also, although participants were asked to rate their classmates on several dimensions, they were not ranked relative to each other. Hence, their rank in terms of dominance within the group was not directly assessed. Our first aim was therefore to examine, in existing groups, if socially anxious individuals are perceived as being less dominant by their group members.

Besides the hierarchical agonic mode, the psychobiological framework also proposes that socially anxious individuals underize a more cooperative and affiliative hedonic mode (Trower & Gilbert, 1989). It is clear that socially anxious individuals report problems affiliating with others (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Also, several studies indicated that individuals with social anxiety were perceived as less warm or likeable (e.g., Alden & Wallace, 1995; Meleshko & Alden, 1993; Papsdorf & Alden, 1998; Voncken & Dijk, 2013). Similarly, several studies show that socially anxious individuals have impaired relationships (e.g., Aderka et al., 2012; Davila & Beck, 2002; Rodebaugh, 2009; Schneider et al., 1994). A study of Inderbitzen, Walters, and Bukowski (1997) showed that classmates that were rejected by others reported more social anxiety. This indicates that social anxiety might also affect an individual’s likeability in existing groups. However, we are not aware of any studies that tested this directly in adult samples. Furthermore, socially anxious individuals often underestimate their likeability and social performance (Alden & Wallace, 1995; Dijk & de Jong, 2012; Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993). The question thus remains if, within groups, social anxiety is related to the affiliative dimension in addition to dominance.

Several studies simultaneously examined the relation of social anxiety to both dominance and affiliation. Some of them found that social anxiety was related to decreased dominance and decreased affiliation (Alden & Phillips, 1990; Walters & Hope, 1998; Weisman, Aderka, Marom, Hermesh, & Gilboa-Schechtman, 2011). Other studies showed that social anxiety was more strongly related to decreased dominance than to decreased affiliation however (Aderka et al., 2009; Berger et al., 2017; Trower et al., 1998). Also, a study by Oakman et al. (2003) showed that although social anxiety was negatively related to both warmth and dominance on self-report measures, it was only negatively related to dominance when rated by others. These mixed results could partly be explained by the heterogeneity of individuals with social anxiety. For instance, Kachin, Newman, and Pincus (2001) showed that socially anxious individuals could be categorized as having difficulties with anger, hostility, and mistrustfulness on the one hand, or with unassertiveness, exploitability, and over-nurturance on the other hand. Given these mixed findings, our second aim was therefore to explore if in addition to lower dominance ratings, social anxiety is also related to lower affiliation ratings by self and others.

To summarize, the current study expands upon previous research by testing if, in existing groups, social anxiety is related to lower dominance and lower affiliation ratings by both self and by group members, as would be predicted by psychobiological theories of social anxiety. Because socially anxious individuals tend to underestimate their performance (Alden & Wallace, 1995; Dijk & de Jong, 2012; Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993), we further hypothesize that more socially anxious individuals underestimate their dominance and affiliation score. Thus, social anxiety is related to larger discrepancies between the dominance and affiliation ratings of self versus others.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

The participants were third-year psychology university students, who followed a series of seminars in eight groups of 11–15 students for the duration of 20 weeks. Of the 98 students that took part in this course, 79 students were present at the final seminar and participated in the study. Since self-ratings were missing for three of these students, the final analyses were conducted with the data of 76 participants.

2.2. Procedure

Two research assistants visited the final seminars to collect the data. Participants were told that we wanted to investigate social ranks in groups and the relation of these ranks to a number of personality characteristics.1 Upon providing informed consent, participants completed the interpersonal grid and a social anxiety measure (see Section 2.3 Materials). The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

2.3. Materials

2.3.1. Brief fear of negative evaluation-II (BFNE-II)

Social anxiety was measured with the BFNE-II (Carleton, McCrea, Norton, & Asmundson, 2006; translated into Dutch by Van Wees-Geraad & de Jong, 2007). The 12 items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale.
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