



## SOCIAL PHOBIA AND SOCIAL APPRAISAL IN SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

LYNN E. ALDEN and SCOTT T. WALLACE

Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., Canada V6T 1Z4

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**Summary**—32 generalized social phobic outpatients and 32 matched nonclinical control subjects participated in a dyadic 'getting acquainted' interaction with an experimental assistant who engaged in either positive or negative social behavior. The accuracy of social phobics' and control subjects' perceptions of themselves and their partners were compared in the two conditions. Relative to observers' ratings, the social phobics displayed a negative bias in their appraisals of some, but not all, aspects of their social performance. These results suggested that social phobics may have particular difficulty gauging the nonverbal aspects of their social behavior. The phobics discounted their social competence to the same extent in the positive interaction, where their behavior was more skilful, as in the negative interaction. The social phobics were also less accurate than nonclinical controls in their appraisals of their partners, however, these phobic subjects displayed a positive bias when appraising their partner's performance.

### INTRODUCTION

Cognitive models of social phobia underscore the role of dysfunctional social beliefs, negative self-dialogues, and selective attention to threat cues in maintaining this disorder (e.g. Beck, Emery & Greenberg, 1985; Dodge, Hope, Heimberg & Becker, 1988; Hope, Rapee, Heimberg & Dombeck, 1990; Lucock & Salkovskis, 1988). Beck and others have proposed that these factors interact to create a self-perpetuating cycle of anxiety-provoking cognitions (Beck *et al.*, 1985; Stopa & Clark, 1993). Several recent studies suggest that biased self-perception may play a role in this process (Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993). In these studies, social phobics were found to underestimate the effectiveness of their social behavior relative to the rating of objective observers. Although the social phobic subjects were rated by observers as less skilful than control subjects, the phobic individuals appeared to exaggerate the extent of their deficiencies. Rapee and Lim (1992) proposed that the tendency to discount the effectiveness of one's social behavior contributes to the fear of social disapproval that is central to social phobia.

The relatively few studies that have systematically examined the phenomenon of discounting raise several questions about the conditions under which discounting arises and more generally about the way in which social phobic individuals process information about themselves. The first question is whether discounting is confined to situations that the phobic person finds difficult to manage. Research to date has examined self-appraisal in social situations that were deliberately structured to be ambiguous (e.g. interactions with a confederate in a neutral role; public speaking situations where audience reaction is unclear). Studies of shy and socially anxious populations indicate that unstructured or ambiguous situations may be particularly problematic for such individuals (e.g. Pilkonis, 1977). It may be that discomfort with ambiguity or a tendency to interpret an absence of response as a negative response leads socially anxious individuals to underestimate an already weak level of social performance. Although social phobics tend to display less effective social behavior than nonanxious individuals, their level of effectiveness varies across situations, and they handle some social encounters well. If social phobics display distorted self-perceptions in successful social encounters it would suggest that discounting is a general feature of the way they process self-related information. On the other hand, if a negative perceptual bias is a function of awkward behavior or general discomfort, social phobics' self-perceptions should be more distorted in unsuccessful social interactions than in successful ones.

A second question concerns the way in which error enters into the social phobic's self-related judgements. Social behavior is complex, and any interaction involves a number of positive and negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors that must be monitored, assessed (i.e. gauged), and integrated to arrive at a judgment of one's social effectiveness. It is unclear at what point in this process problems arise, however, the empirical literature suggests three possibilities: selective attention to negative aspects of performance, failure to attend to objective information about one's social performance, and difficulty integrating diverse pieces of information about one's performance. Research indicates that the social phobic's cognitive set, or schema, directs attention to selective types of incoming information, particularly information related to social failure (e.g. Hope *et al.*, 1990). This process may give priority to negative information about one's performance, such as behavioral deficiencies or subjective discomfort, and result in an over-estimation of these features. Stopa and Clark (1993) found that both social phobic and control subjects underestimated positive aspects of their social behavior, but in addition, the social phobics overestimated negative aspects of their behavior. This is consistent with the notion that social phobics attend more to deficiencies in their social performances than do nonanxious people. It is also notable that the negative items used by Stopa and Clark primarily concerned symptoms of anxiety. Social phobics have been shown to be higher than nonclinical control groups on anxiety sensitivity (e.g. Craske, Rachman & Tallman, 1986), and it may be that this sensitivity leads them to overestimate the visibility of the anxiety they feel (see, for example, McEwan & Devins, 1983). Taken together, these studies suggest that social phobics may display a selective pattern of distortions where judgements related to negative aspects of performance or to anxiety-related behaviors may be inaccurate, whereas other types of self-related judgments may be as accurate as those of nonphobic individuals.

Research has also shown that social phobics engage in negative internal dialogues that are believed to divert attention from other cues about their performance (e.g. Dodge *et al.*, 1988). It may be that the social phobic's problem is not so much selective attention to information about his or her performance as an absence of information about that performance. Social phobics' self-appraisals may be based primarily on their preconceived beliefs that they are inadequate, i.e. their existing self-schemas, than on information about their actual behavior in the specific interaction. If so, one might expect them to be somewhat insensitive to changes in their behavior and to rate their performance at the same low level regardless of their actual skill. If, on the other hand, social phobics do monitor and take in information about their performance, but simply do so in a biased manner, they should be able to detect changes in their overall level of performance (i.e. rate their behavior more positively when it is good than when it is poor), although they may underestimate some or all aspects of their performance relative to the ratings of objective observers.

Finally, Rapee and Lim (1992) proposed that the social phobic's problem may not be a bias in the perception of specific behavioral elements, but an inability to integrate these specific perceptions into an overall judgement. These researchers found that social phobics were as accurate as nonclinical controls in their appraisals of specific social behaviors but were less accurate in their global appraisals of their overall social performance. Thus, it may be that social phobics perceive positive and negative aspects of their behavior accurately but overestimate the extent to which small behavioral deficiencies impair the overall impression they make on others.

A third general question raised by discounting studies is whether the negative perceptual bias of social phobics is specific to self-related judgements or is characteristic of all social judgements, i.e. extends to judgements regarding others. Studies of socially anxious students have found evidence of a negative bias in their appraisals of others' responses to them. Specifically, socially anxious students perceived standardized social feedback to be more negative than nonanxious students (Smith & Sarason, 1975) and interpreted standardized facial expressions as conveying a more negative response to them than did nonanxious students (Pozo, Carver, Wellens & Scheier, 1991). Few empirical studies have directly examined social phobics' social perceptions. However, Rapee and Lim (1992) found social phobics to be as accurate as nonphobics when rating other subjects' speeches, which indicates that social phobics do not have a general negative bias that extends to all social judgements. Stopa and Clark (1993) asked social phobics to list their thoughts during a social interaction and found that they made little reference to their partner's characteristics or reactions. Thus, if these social phobics believed others were critical or responded negatively to them, this was not their central concern. These studies would suggest that social phobics do not

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