

**Utility of Downward Social Comparison Theory for Understanding Interaction
Preferences of Socially Anxious Individuals**

By

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree
of
Master of Arts

June 2005



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0-494-08850-8

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Direction du
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395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
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395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

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Abstract

Individuals high in social anxiety often react negatively to situations calling for interaction with others. How can the negative effects of social anxiety be reduced? Using the framework provided by social comparison theory, this research examined what type of interaction partner would foster positive affective consequences and improved social functioning in socially anxious individuals. Two alternatives were considered, one being that socially anxious individuals prefer and benefit more from interactions with those who are low in social anxiety and the other being that socially anxious individuals prefer and benefit more from interactions with fellow socially anxious people. The findings indicated that, regardless of their own anxiety level, participants felt better about themselves when paired with anxious partners but had negative evaluations of these partners. When paired with an anxious partner, participants were more likely to appraise their social skills favorably and to use self-enhancing and self-evaluative social comparisons. Overall, the findings were highly consistent with the clinical literature on socially anxious individuals. Participants high in social anxiety had more negative cognitions, lower self-esteem, and felt rejected by their partners. Behaviorally, socially anxious participants felt that they acted in a socially awkward fashion and were perceived by their partners as behaving in an anxious fashion. These results corroborate previous research indicating that a negative self-image significantly overshadows social interaction for socially anxious individuals.

Utility of Social Comparison Theory for Understanding Interaction Preferences Of Socially Anxious Individuals

Although neglected for many years, social anxiety is a condition that has been the focus of much research in the past few decades, and rightly so. Social anxiety is one of the most prevalent types of anxiety. It is estimated that there are close to 2.4 million untreated sufferers of clinical levels of social anxiety in the United States alone (Westenberg, 1998). Among the major mental disorders, only alcohol and drug abuse have lower rates of treatment (Olfson et al., 2000). Social anxiety is characterized by a fear or apprehension of social and/or performance situations. When in these situations, socially anxious individuals usually experience physical symptoms of anxiety (blushing, sweating, tremors) as well as negative cognitive interpretations of events (believing that they will be judged boring or inadequate). An acute awareness of their physical arousal often leads socially anxious individuals to believe that others will also notice their anxiety. This belief reinforces their negative cognitions, which results in increased anxiety levels. Essentially, the person becomes anxious about being seen as anxious.

It is necessary at this point to differentiate between state and trait social anxiety. A tendency for researchers to neglect this distinction when writing about social anxiety has led to a lack of conceptual clarity (Leary, 1986). Social anxiety as a trait “may be viewed as a generalized negative expectancy concerning social encounters which is more or less characteristic of the individual” (Morris, Harris, & Robbins, 1981, p. 303). Almost everyone experiences the state of social anxiety at one time or another, whether it is because it’s the first day on a new job or having to give a speech in front of a room full of peers. It is when

individuals become preoccupied with how others view them and have enduring negative beliefs about their own worth in the eyes of others that social anxiety becomes problematic.

The following sections will review the existing research on functional impairment associated with social anxiety, the physiological, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms of social anxiety, and on how social interaction can trigger these symptoms. One specific precipitating factor of social anxiety that has received little attention in previous research is the characteristics of the other person with whom the socially anxious individual is interacting. Although there has not been much research that concerns the interaction partners of the socially anxious, this is likely to be important both theoretically (delineating a situational trigger of social anxiety) and practically (allowing greater understanding of how to utilize group-oriented therapy in social phobia). Social comparison theory will provide a framework for the prediction that socially anxious individuals will prefer and respond positively to interactions with similarly anxious others. This hypothesis, and alternative possible patterns, are tested in the study.

Functional Impairment in Social Anxiety

The difference between normal anxiety and dysfunctional anxiety is that normal anxiety peaks shortly after exposure to the feared stimulus and then soon subsides, whereas in dysfunctional anxiety (such as high levels of social anxiety) this intense anxiety does not subside and can impair the functional ability of the sufferer (Ballenger et al., 1998). When socially anxious individuals seek psychotherapy, the most frequent complaints relate to feelings of discomfort in social interactions along with avoidance of social situations (Clark & Arkowitz, 1975). High levels of social anxiety often do result in the individual avoiding feared situations. This aversion can dramatically affect the individual's quality of life due to

restricted social networks, unfulfilled opportunities for meaningful relationships, and hampered occupational performance.

Olfason et al. (2000) reported that, in a large community-based screening effort in the United States, 42% of the approximately 14,000 people surveyed endorsed both items relating to social anxiety symptoms (avoidance of social situations and fear of evaluation by others). Examination of the background characteristics of these individuals revealed that, compared to controls, a higher proportion of the socially anxious group had never been married or were divorced or separated. In addition, individuals exhibiting symptoms of social anxiety had a lower level of education and were more likely to be unemployed. In this sample social anxiety was strongly associated with feelings of isolation, and almost one in four socially anxious individuals reported suicidal ideation in the last month. This association remained significant even after controlling for confounding factors, such as non-social anxiety and depressive symptoms. The conclusions drawn from this sample are not novel; other epidemiological studies have found comparable results. For example, in a paper describing the impact that social anxiety has on both its sufferers and the health care system, Lecrubier (1998) reported that, compared to controls, individuals with clinical levels of social anxiety have been found to miss work between two and four times more and are more likely to be unmarried, unemployed, and dependent on alcohol. Similarly, Wittchen and Beloch (1996) found that individuals with clinical levels of social anxiety had a significantly impaired quality of life, especially in the domains of social functioning, mental health, vitality, and role limitations. Impairment was most severe with regards to partner and family relationships, education and career development, and household or work management.

These results are clear evidence of the pervasive negative impact social anxiety can have on its sufferers.

Similar findings have emerged from the non-clinical literature on social anxiety. Jones and Carpenter (1986) found social reticence to be correlated significantly with loneliness in each type of relationship examined (romantic/sexual, friendship, family, community/group) and correlated inversely with measures of social provisions (e.g., guidance, reassurance of worth). Social anxiety was associated with having family members as a greater proportion of significant others and having known significant others for more than five years (demonstrating inability to make new meaningful relationships). These people indicated that they had fewer people they could count on for social support and were less satisfied with the support they received. Social anxiety was inversely related to number of current friends, satisfaction with friends and size of social networks. The data above seem to suggest that socially anxious individuals feel that they lack intimacy and esteem in their friendships.

The socially anxious not only have trouble initiating friendships, but their social difficulties also carry over into the realm of dating and relations with the opposite sex. Dodge, Heimberg, Nyman, and O'Brien (1987) conducted a diary assessment of the effects of social anxiety on heterosexual interactions. It was revealed that high social anxiety participants engaged in fewer interactions with the opposite sex, reported greater anxiety, rated their performance more negatively, and reported less satisfaction with their performance than low anxiety participants. By the same token, most studies have found that socially anxious college students report dating less frequently, participate less in social and

extracurricular events, and are less fond of others in general (e.g., Jones & Briggs, 1984; Jones & Russell, 1982).

Maladaptive social anxiety often does not meet the DSM criteria for social anxiety disorder because of the requirement of avoidance of certain social situations. Individuals who fall into this category of being sub-clinically socially anxious still experience significant distress in social situations but endure, rather than avoid, the settings that precipitate their anxiety. Turner, Beidel, and Larkin (1986) attempted to delineate some of the differences between individuals with clinical and sub-clinical levels of social anxiety and found that both groups responded similarly during social interactions in terms of positive cognitions (or lack thereof) and in physiological response (heart rate, systolic and diastolic blood pressure). Surprisingly, compared to the group of clinically diagnosed social phobics, individuals with sub-clinical levels of social anxiety reported more negative cognitions during an opposite sex interaction. Apparently, the biggest difference between these two groups is in the behavioral manifestations of their anxiety, with the clinically assessed social phobics demonstrating more inhibited and avoidant behavior. Although the research reviewed below primarily focuses on individuals with sub-clinical levels of social anxiety, it is important to realize that social anxiety, even at sub-clinical levels, can have a profound negative impact on the sufferer.

The Anxiety-Inhibition Cycle

An issue that often complicates research on social anxiety is the inter-relatedness of the construct's different components. The central symptoms of social anxiety (physiological, cognitive and behavioral) can each, either directly or indirectly, exacerbate the others creating what has been labeled the anxiety-inhibition cycle (Leary 1986). For example,

imagine an individual who becomes anxious in interactions with the opposite sex. This individual, likely aware of his or her own heterosexual anxiety, would feel somewhat inadequate in this domain and want to remedy the situation. Although the individual may try to appear confident, he/she still experiences anxiety-related arousal when interacting with the opposite sex. When aroused, socially anxious individuals often believe others will notice this arousal and evaluate them harshly because of it. This belief of imminent negative evaluation from others is likely to cause the socially anxious individual to try to distance him/herself from the threatening stimulus, either passively through inhibited behavior or actively through avoidant behavior. Although in this example the physiological component influenced the cognitive component which influenced the behavioral component, one specific component is not necessarily a precursor for another. In another case, negative cognitions may give rise to physiological arousal leading to inhibited behavior. This ineffective social behavior will likely be remembered by the individual next time he or she enters into an interaction, hence exacerbating his or her fear of future social situations. Thus, the anxiety-inhibition cycle acts as a positive feedback loop, in which one symptom will seemingly intensify the next. In the following sections the individual components of social anxiety are examined in more detail.

Physiological Arousal in Social Anxiety

Common anxiety-related physiological symptoms include blushing, sweating, tremors, and increased heart rate. Socially anxious individuals not only experience these symptoms but believe that their arousal is apparent to others. Elevated somatic symptoms are often associated with beliefs that one's anxiety is more salient to others than is actually the case (McEwan & Devins, 1983). Beidel, Turner, and Dancu (1985) conducted a study

assessing the physiological reactions of a sample of socially anxious participants in different social tasks. They found that, compared to their non-socially anxious counterparts, socially anxious participants exhibited significantly higher heart rate and blood pressure during an opposite-sex role play task and an impromptu speech. Interestingly, the two groups did not differ in physiological measures during a same-sex interaction, suggesting that socially anxious individuals become more aroused in heterosexual interactions and public speaking situations than in the context of same-sex interactions. The interpretation suggested by the authors was that “the repertoire of the socially anxious is not extremely inadequate, but high levels of arousal interfere with their performance” (Beidel et al., 1985, p. 110).

Negative Cognitions in Social Anxiety

The cognitive component of anxiety includes an individual's beliefs, assumptions, and expectancies about themselves and how the world works (Sarason & Sarason, 1986). Specifically, social fears often focus on the response of others (Shear & Beidel, 1998). One of the central features of social anxiety is the fear of being scrutinized by others with the expectation that the reaction will be negative (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [Fourth Edition; DSM-IV] American Psychiatric Association, 1994). This fear of negative evaluations by others is a habitual response of the socially anxious, leading them to become overly preoccupied with self-evaluative thoughts, usually assessing their personal capabilities in a negative fashion (Sarason & Sarason, 1986).

In one of the first studies that evaluated the cognitions of socially anxious individuals, Clark and Arkowitz (1975) had socially anxious men briefly interact with female confederates. They found that high socially anxious participants rated themselves as more socially anxious and less socially skilled. Anxious participants overestimated the

negative aspects and underestimated the positive aspects of their social performance.

Compared with judges' ratings, high socially anxious participants underestimated the social skill they exhibited in heterosexual interactions, whereas low socially anxious participants did not. Interestingly, both high and low socially anxious participants' ratings of others were consistent with judges' ratings of others, suggesting that anxious individuals' critical stance is specific to judgments about themselves. High and low socially anxious participants seem to use similar standards when evaluating the social performance of others, but different standards when evaluating themselves (socially anxious individuals may have employed more critical standards when judging themselves). Alternatively, socially anxious individuals may have selectively attended to/remembered negative aspects of their performance.

Subsequent research in this area has yielded comparable results in regard to the cognitions of socially anxious individuals. Beidel et al. (1985) assessed the cognitive style of socially anxious and non-socially anxious participants across three different tasks (opposite-sex interaction, same-sex interaction and impromptu speech). They found that the socially anxious participants had significantly more negative and fewer positive cognitions than those in the non-socially anxious group. In each of the three tasks socially anxious participants rated themselves as more anxious than non-socially anxious participants. They also perceived themselves as less skillful in the opposite sex interactions. In addition, the two groups differed in attributional style. Whereas socially anxious participants attributed their perceived failures to their lack of social skill, their non-socially anxious counterparts were more likely to attribute awkward behavior to the situation, rather than themselves, reflecting more developed coping skills. Similarly, Jones and Briggs (1986) found that

socially anxious participants rated themselves and expected to be rated less positively (e.g., less friendly, less warm) when taking part in group or dyadic activities. For socially anxious participants, the correlation between expected and actual ratings by group members was .01, implying that these individuals are not especially accurate in predicting how others view them (the average correlation between expected and actual ratings was .45). Assuming accurate feedback is needed for adequate social performance, this study indicates that socially anxious people are a disadvantage.

Why do socially anxious individuals have so much trouble estimating others' reactions to them? As mentioned above, the answer likely lies in these individuals' high levels of self-focused attention. The self-preoccupation that accompanies social anxiety interferes with the range of complex social responses required for meaningful interaction and hinders individuals' ability to fully attend to subtle social cues in the ongoing interaction (Leary, 1986; Pozo, Carver, Wellens & Scheier, 1991).

Inhibited and Avoidant Behavior in Social Anxiety

In general, socially anxious individuals report feeling clumsy and inadequate in social situations (Jones & Carpenter, 1986). Although socially anxious people do not invariably avoid social situations, the vast majority do report feelings of incompetence in social encounters (Beidel et al., 1985). Studies involving dyadic conversations and videotaped monologues show that, when compared to their non-socially anxious counterparts, socially anxious participants initiate fewer conversations, talk less, smile less, give less eye contact, and look into the camera less (e.g., Beidel et al.; Cheek & Buss, 1981; Pilkonis, 1977). In a recent study, Creed and Funder (1998) discerned how socially anxious individuals' behavior is viewed by others. By gathering data from socially anxious

participants' interaction partners and friends the researchers came up with a list of behaviors that were significantly correlated ($p < .001$) with social anxiety. This list included behaviors such as exhibiting an awkward interpersonal style, behaving in a fearful or timid manner, keeping his or her partner at a distance, expressing insecurity, seeming detached from the interaction, being reserved and unexpressive, and showing physical signs of tension and anxiety. Other researchers have consistently found that socially anxious individuals demonstrate reticence, withdrawal, and less responsiveness in interpersonal behaviors, and that this ineffective interactional style is especially prevalent when interacting with strangers (e.g., Jones & Carpenter, 1986; Leary, 1986). These behaviors are of the type that could alienate an interaction partner, especially a new acquaintance. It would not be difficult to interpret this behavior as disinterest in the interaction or dislike for the interaction partner. Indeed, Jones and Carpenter (1986) found that across studies observers not only notice the social anxiety of others, but also label them unfriendly and lacking in conversational skills.

In addition, there seems to be a component of avoidance learning present for many socially anxious individuals, whereby they learn to combat intolerable anxiety symptoms by simply escaping from the situation (Nutt, Bell, & Malizia, 1998). This type of behavior often successfully combats anxiety symptoms but gives rise to social isolation when the individual avoids similar types of situations in the future. Taken together, the research in this area suggests that socially anxious persons "behave less effectively with strangers and specifically in ways that would seem to reduce the likelihood that a mutually satisfying relationship will develop from any given interaction" (Jones & Carpenter, 1986, p. 230).

Triggers of State Social Anxiety

The research reviewed above reveals that socially anxious individuals often suffer from a host of problematic physiological, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms. When placed in social situations, socially anxious individuals frequently become highly aroused, experience negative cognitions concerning their social competence and how they are viewed by others, and behave in ways that are not conducive to successful social interaction (i.e., they exhibit inhibited and avoidant behavior). There is also an acute sensitivity to situational factors involved in social anxiety. The acute experience of social anxiety is elicited by three factors (Buss, 1980). The first factor is novelty, which includes unfamiliar physical settings, social novelty (e.g., meeting strangers), and role novelty. The second factor, presence of others, is influenced by the formality of the situation as well by the status of others present (i.e., high status others foster more anxiety). The third factor is the actions of others, which includes excessive attention (e.g., being stared at), insufficient attention (e.g., being ignored) and intrusiveness (e.g., being asked personal questions). Any one or a combination of these factors will likely elicit situational anxiety.

This study will consider an additional potentially important situational factor in triggering more positive (or negative) reactions in socially anxious individuals, the social anxiety of the person with whom they are interacting. Two possibilities seem plausible. The first is that, regardless of their level of social anxiety, people will prefer interacting with non-anxious individuals. Non-anxious interaction partners are likely to convey more positivity and their adequate social skills should result in a smoother, more comfortable interaction. Social comparison theory, which outlines how individuals process social information in an effort to evaluate their abilities, provides a second framework for considering the effects of an interaction partner's anxiety. Research in this area has

established people's sensitivity to social evaluative information. Given socially anxious people's pervasive evaluative concerns, social comparison theory seems likely to be quite applicable to them. Interacting with individuals who are also socially anxious should ease these evaluative concerns and lead to more favorable comparisons than interacting with someone who is socially skilled.

Understanding the interaction partners to whom socially anxious people have the most positive reactions will illuminate a possible "trigger" of the experience of social anxiety, and also indicate the types of interactions that are apt to be the most positive and encouraging for socially anxious individuals. Two alternatives will be considered, one being that socially anxious individuals will prefer to interact with someone who is low in social anxiety and the other being that they would rather interact with someone who is high in social anxiety.

Why Might Socially Anxious Individuals Prefer to Interact with Non-Anxious Others? The Role of Social Skills

In determining the impact that a low social anxiety interaction partner will have on the affective and behavioral reactions of socially anxious individuals, it seems useful to consider the effects of interacting with a socially skilled individual. Common sense indicates that it would be more enjoyable to have a conversation with someone who has ample social skills (i.e., low social anxiety) compared to interacting with someone who is overly reserved, nervous, or lacking in conversational skills (i.e., high social anxiety). Many social psychological studies have yielded results that support this common sense logic: Socially skilled individuals tend to elicit more positive reactions from their conversational partners (e.g., Meleshko & Alden, 1993). Spivey and Wilson (1973) found that participants

rated a hypothetical stranger most favorably when they believed that this stranger was warm, confident, and enthusiastic, all traits likely to be apparent in low social anxiety. When Lott, Lott, Reed, and Crow (1970) asked individuals what traits are characteristic of people they like, many of the adjectives provided by participants tapped the dimension of social competence (e.g., friendly relaxed, warm, sociable). Compared to socially anxious people, non-anxious individuals are viewed as more likeable, more sympathetic, and easier to talk to by friends and families (Jones & Carpenter, 1986). Non-socially anxious college students are described by their peers as skilled in social techniques, humorous, assertive, and socially poised (Creed & Funder, 1998). The picture painted of socially anxious college students is much different. They tend to be viewed by their peers as moody, defensive and negative (Creed & Funder, 1998). Similarly, when rated by their college dorm mates, individuals who scored high on affectionate sociability were more often considered accepted and those lower in sociability were often rejected (Krebs & Adinolfi, 1975).

This rejection effect is also found in first meeting situations, as demonstrated in a number of laboratory studies of interactions with strangers. In a short dyadic interaction non-anxious participants were rated as more likeable than anxious ones and conversation partners felt more comfortable interacting with non-anxious, compared to socially anxious participants (Meleshko & Alden, 1993). Comparable findings were reported by Creed and Funder (1998), in that people who interacted with a partner low in social anxiety seemed more interested in their partner, seemed to like their partner more, and enjoyed the interaction more.

As early as kindergarten, liking among peers is often best predicted by a child's social competence, with the most socially skilled children being the most popular

(Mendelson, Aboud, & Lanthier, 1994). Other researchers have found analogous results with first, third and fifth grade children (Dekovic & Gerris, 1994). Indeed, a meta-analytic review (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993) showed that the children who are most liked or accepted by their peers demonstrate above average sociability (based on indices of communication skill, friendship skill, and positive social action).

From the literature reviewed above it would be easy to conclude that interacting with a socially skilled partner would be beneficial for socially anxious individuals. Non-anxious people seem to promote enjoyable interactions and induce positive mood in their conversation partners. However, I hypothesized that this social fluency has an opposite effect on socially anxious individuals. That is, I anticipated that individuals' own level of social anxiety moderates how they are affected by their interaction partner's anxiety. Socially anxious people appear to be primarily motivated to avoid social disapproval and show a strong desire to avoid interacting with others who are likely to disapprove of or dislike them (Smith, 1972). Given that two core features of social anxiety are a persistent fear of negative evaluation (Beidel et al., 1985; Clark & Arkowitz, 1975; Shear & Beidel, 1998) and a tendency to interpret one's social performance negatively (Clark & Arkowitz; Leary, 1986; Pozo et al., 1991), interacting with a socially competent partner would make it quite easy for one's own social skills to be cast in a negative light. This notion will be more fully described in the next section.

Why Might Socially Anxious Individuals Prefer to Interact with Anxious Others? The Role of Social Comparison

The basic tenet of social comparison theory is that many psychological characteristics (e.g., abilities, feelings) are not easily referenced against an objective