The Relationship between Social Anxiety and Emotional Expressivity

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Abstract

Social anxiety is a devastating and persistent condition that is characterized by a fear of social interactions (Luterek, 2006). Emotional expressivity is the tendency to express emotions nonverbally, such as through actions, facial expressions, tone of voice, and posture (Barchard & Matsumoto, in prep). Because social anxiety and emotional expressivity are both related to social interactions, there may be a negative correlation between them. In this study, 508 participants were recruited from the Psychology Subject Pool; they completed the Liebowitz (1987) Social Anxiety Scale and six measures of emotional expressivity (happiness, amusement, affection, sadness, anger, and fear). There was a moderate negative correlation between social anxiety and the expression of affection. However, social anxiety did not correlate with the expression of the remaining five emotions. Perhaps the expression of these other emotions did not have significant correlations with social anxiety because they do not always involve social interactions, the way that affection does. This research suggests that affection may have a different relationship with social anxiety than other emotions do. Future research could explore whether social anxiety can be reduced by increasing patient's expression of affection.

Introduction

Social Anxiety is a debilitating and chronic condition which is characterized by a persistent fear of interacting or performing in social situations. This fear is caused by concerns of embarrassment, humiliation, or negative evaluations by others (Luterek, 2006). Segrin (1992) argued that social skills are based on three things: ability, performance, and perceptions of outcomes. His study suggests that people who suffer from social anxiety often feel unmotivated to engage in social interactions. Socially anxious persons feel they will inhibit their communication and others around them will perceive their nervousness. Social Anxiety includes both fear and avoidance (Balon, 2007). Because of these fears, those with social anxiety often avoid social interactions altogether.

Emotional expressivity refers to the expression of emotions in nonverbal ways, such as through actions, expressions of the face, tone of voice, and posture (Barchard, & Matsumoto, in prep). In the past, emotional expressivity was often measured uni-dimensionally, which meant that researchers assumed that people who cry a lot are also the ones who laugh a lot. However, Barchard and Matsumoto found that emotional expressivity is best measured using a higher-order model. This model states that the expression of each emotion has only a small relationship with the expression of other emotions. They divide emotional expressivity into six dimensions: happiness, affection, amusement, anger, fear, and sadness. Both Barchard and Matsumoto (in prep) and others have found that these scales have differential validity. Barchard and Matsumoto (in prep) found that the expression of happiness, affection, and amusement had a positive moderate correlations with Extraversion and very small correlations with Neuroticism; whereas the expression of anger, fear, and sadness generally had smaller correlations with Extraversion. Suveg, Mary, and Maine (2004) also found that each of these factors has different connections with both personality and behavior.

We hypothesize that people with social anxiety will be less emotionally expressive. Luterek (2006) hypothesized that since social anxiety is the fear of being embarrassed or humiliated by others, by definition, social anxiety would hinder or change one's ability to be fully expressive. Relationships of socially anxious individuals are often restricted and controlled by these fears. After examining both socially anxious and non-anxious persons, Luterek found that the emotionally anxious persons showed a noticeable difference in facial expressivity overall. On the other hand, Heerey and Kring (2007) found that people with social anxiety were more likely than non-socially anxious people to use anger-, fear-, and sadness-laden emotion words when engaged in social situations. The purpose of this research will be to examine the relationship between social anxiety and emotional expressivity, to resolve this apparent conflict.

A link between social anxiety and emotional expressivity is also apparent in research with children. Suveg, Zeman, Flannery-Schroeder, and Cassano (2005) examined the relationship between the emotional expressivity of mothers with social anxiety and their children's emotional expressivity. They found that mothers of children with anxiety disorders spoke less often than their children, and were more likely to discourage their children from being emotional (Suveg, Zeman, & Flannery-Schroeder, et al. 2005). This study demonstrated how adults with social anxiety might develop problems with emotional expressivity during childhood. Shipman and Zeman (1998) also studied how social factors can affect emotional expressivity in children. They found that socially anxious children limited their emotional expressions (not showing they are sad, happy, etc.) so they won't be teased or judged by their peers. Thus, these studies show that relationships between emotional expressivity and social anxiety may span all ages and, if links are found, they will be important for all generations.

To test our hypothesis we will correlate social anxiety with emotion-specific measures of emotional expressivity. We expect negative relationships for each of the emotional expressivity scales.

Method

Participants

A total of 508 (209 male, 299 female) students participated for course credit. Ages ranged from 18 to 50 (mean 19.78, SD 3.17). Participants identified themselves as 57.1% Caucasian, 12.8% Hispanic, 11.4% Asian, 7.9% African American, 6.3% Pacific Islander, 4% Native American, and 4.1% other.

Measures

The Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS; Liebowitz, 2002) is a commonly used self-report measure of social anxiety. The LSAS consists of 24 items, each depicting different a social situation. For each situation, the person rates their level of fear (where 0 indicates no fear and 3 indicates severe fear) and avoidance (0 indicates they never avoid a particular situation and 3 indicates they usually avoid that situation). The items are divided into two subscales: social interaction and performance situations. The overall score is based on six additional scores: total fear, fear of social interaction, fear of performance situations, total avoidance, avoidance of social interaction, and avoidance of performance situations (Baker, Heinrichs, Hofmann, & Hyo-Jin, 2002). In our study, we used total scores on the LSAS.

Emotional expressivity was measured using 22 items that evaluate the expression of six emotions: happiness, affection, amusement, anger, fear, and sadness (Barchard, & Matsumoto, in prep). Each item is scored on a scale of 1 to 5 (where a score of 1 is strongly disagree and a 5 is strongly agree). Happy had three items, affection had four items, amusement had three items, sadness had four items, anger had five items, and fear had three items (see Table 1).

Procedures

Data was collected over the Internet, in a two-part study. Each part of the study took approximately 1.5 hours.

Table 1
Sample Items for Each Emotion Specific Dimension

Emotion	Item
Happiness	Show my feelings when I'm happy
Affection	Express my affection physically
Amusement	Sometimes laugh out loud when reading or watching TV
Anger	Shout or scream when I'm angry
Fear	Express my fears openly when I'm with my close friends
Sadness	Suspect that my facial expressions give me away when I feel sad

Results

We calculated correlations between the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale with the six emotional expressivity dimensions of happiness, affection, amusement, sadness, anger, and fear. Five of these correlations were small (less than .1) and not significant. However, the correlation for expression of affection was negative, moderate, and statistically significant: on average, people with social anxiety displayed less affection (see Table 2).

Table 2
Correlations of Emotional Expressivity with Social Anxiety

Emotion	Correlation
Happiness	-.07
Affection	-.28**
Amusement	-.05
Anger	-.06
Fear	.003
Sadness	.07

$* p < .05.$ $** p < .01.$

Conclusions

This study examined the correlations between six dimensions of emotional expressivity and social anxiety. We hypothesized that socially anxious people would score lower on the six emotion-specific dimensions of emotional expressivity. However, only one of the six expressivity dimensions yielded a significant relationship: expression of affection had a moderate, negative correlation with social anxiety. This signifies that people suffering from social anxiety have a tendency to express affection less often, which agrees with our hypothesis.

It may be that the expression of affection was the only dimension with a significant relationship with social anxiety because affection is the only emotion that always involves social interaction. One might feel sadness or happiness or amusement by oneself and one could feel fear or anger at an object or event. However, to feel and express affection implies that the person feels affection towards a person or possibly animal. It is the most social of the emotions studied.

Social relationships are dependent upon all parties being able to express their emotions to some extent. Therefore, if therapists are able to provide therapy on expressiveness then the therapy can attempt to aide a socially anxious person to make social connections more frequently and with greater ease. This suggests an area for future research. It may be that working with patients to improve their expression of affection also reduces their social anxiety. Because the other emotions were unrelated to social anxiety, it might be that increasing the expression of other emotions is not an effective way of reducing social anxiety. Because this study is entirely correlational, we were unable to test this hypothesis here; but future research could explore it.

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