Social Anxiety as an Early Warning System: A Refinement and Extension of the Self-Presentation Theory of Social Anxiety

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Over the past 40 years, behavioral researchers have offered a variety of theoretical approaches for understanding social anxiety and its clinical manifestation—social anxiety disorder. Although several explanations of social anxiety exist, most of them emphasize one of three sets of antecedents: biological mechanisms involving temperamental, genetic, psychophysiological, and evolutionary factors; cognitive patterns in how people think about themselves and their social worlds; and interpersonal processes that occur in the context of social interaction. These perspectives are not necessarily contradictory or mutually exclusive but rather approach the phenomenon of social anxiety from different conceptual angles.

At its heart, the approach of the present chapter is decidedly social psychological in that it traces social anxiety to concerns that arise in the context of real, anticipated, and imagined interpersonal interactions. The chapter describes a refinement and extension of the self-presentation theory of social anxiety (Schlenker & Leary, 1982), a perspective that explains people's nervousness in social encounters in terms of their concerns about other people's perceptions of them. Although the self-presentation theory has fared well under the spotlight of empirical research, theoretical developments shed additional light on the self-presentational nature of social anxiety and provide a bridge by which our understanding of social anxiety may be linked to other phenomena involving interpersonal motives, social emotions, and self-relevant thought. These theoretical refinements—which draw upon Baumeister and Leary's (1995) discussion of the need to belong, Baumeister and Tice's (1990) exclusion theory of anxiety,

Leary and Downs' (1995) sociometer theory, and Leary's (2001) conceptualization of relational value—do not contradict or refute self-presentation theory but rather take it to a deeper level, demonstrating precisely why it is that people worry so much about what other people think of them.

THE ORIGINAL SELF-PRESENTATION THEORY

The self-presentational theory of social anxiety has been described in detail elsewhere (Leary & Kowalski, 1995a, b; Schlenker & Leary, 1982), so we will summarize it only briefly here. The theory's fundamental proposition is that people experience social anxiety before or during social encounters when they are motivated to make a desired impression on other people but doubt that they will successfully make the desired impression. Because the impressions that people make on others have exceptionally important implications for how they are evaluated and treated in everyday life, people are understandably motivated to convey certain impressions of themselves and to avoid making certain other impressions (Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 2012). In most instances, the images that people want to convey of themselves are positive, socially desirable ones, but under some circumstances, people want to be perceived in a socially undesirable fashion. The theory predicts that, regardless of the kinds of images that people wish to convey, the likelihood and intensity of social anxiety increases as people become more motivated to make a particular impression and less certain that they will successfully do so.

One virtue of the self-presentation theory is that it accounts for both the situational and dispositional antecedents of social anxiety—both the kinds of interpersonal situations that evoke anxiety as well as individual differences in the tendency to feel socially anxious. For example, being concerned with making certain impressions on important targets, such as interacting with someone of high social rank, increases social anxiety (Aderka, Weisman, Shahar, & Gilboa-Schectman, 2009). Any situational factor or dispositional trait that is associated with either high motivation to convey desired impressions to others or low confidence in one's ability to make the desired impression should increase social anxiety.

The self-presentational theory has received solid empirical support, both from studies that have taken an explicitly self-presentational perspective as well as those emerging from other theoretical perspectives (see Leary & Kowalski, 1995a). For example, laboratory studies have shown that experimental manipulations that raise and lower participants' self-presentational concerns cause concomitant changes in their experience of social anxiety (DePaulo, Epstein, & LeMay, 1990; Ferrari & Thompson, 2006; Leary, 1986; Sheffer, Penn, & Cassisi, 2001). People who are motivated to make a certain impression experience less social anxiety when they believe they are able to successfully make the desired impression (Catalino, Furr, & Bellis, 2012), and people's ratings of their self-presentational efficacy correlate negatively with how anxious they feel in

both real and imagined encounters (Maddux, Norton, & Leary, 1988; Patterson & Ritts, 1997; Skinner & Brewer, 1999). For example, research on exercise behavior in teenage girls showed a positive relationship between negative self-presentational expectations and social anxiety (Cumming & Thogersen-Ntoumani, 2011). Furthermore, people who are more concerned about their public image feel more anxious when facing an upcoming evaluation but also earlier in the process of being evaluated (Skinner & Brewer, 1999).

When one examines the personality characteristics that predict trait social anxiety most strongly, they too are variables that are associated with concern about other people's impressions. People who are particularly attuned to and concerned about how they are perceived by others score higher on measures of trait social anxiety than those who are less concerned with how they are perceived and evaluated (Fenigstein, 1979; Goldfried & Sobocinski, 1975; Hope & Heimberg, 1988; Kashdan, 2007; Leary & Kowalski, 1993; Norman, Windell, Lynch, & Manchanda, 2012; Reno & Kenny, 1992; Watson & Friend, 1969). For example, public self-consciousness, which involves the degree to which people attend to and think about their public images, is associated with self-presentational concerns and correlates highly with measures of social anxiety, shyness, social reticence, interaction anxiousness, and embarrassment (Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Thorton, Audesse, Ryckman, & Burckle, 2006).

People who do not believe that they will make desired impressions—for example, because they think others will view them as physically unattractive, socially unskilled, or incompetent in a domain with implications for their public image (such as public speaking or athletic contexts)—also tend to be particularly socially anxious (Curran, Wallander, & Fischetti, 1980; Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989; Leary, Kowalski, & Campbell, 1988; Martin & Mack, 1996; Segrin, 1996). In brief, research supports the notion that self-presentational concerns are strongly associated with social anxiety.

Not surprisingly, then, socially anxious people benefit when they are released from the pressure to make a positive impression (Broome & Wegner, 1994; Leary, 1986; Mesagno, Harvey, & Janelle, 2012). For example, Leary (1986) asked participants to have a casual conversation with another individual while noise was played to simulate the din of a loud party. Participants were told either that the noise would interfere with their conversation, making it difficult for them to converse and to form accurate impressions of one another, or that the noise would have a minimal impact on their conversation. Results showed that participants who scored high in trait social anxiety expected to make as positive an impression as low socially anxious people when they thought that the noise was an impediment but expected to make a less positive impression than low socially anxious people when the noise ostensibly had little effect. More importantly, participants were less anxiously aroused (as indicated by pulse rates) when they thought that the noise would interfere with the conversation than when they thought it would not, and this effect was more pronounced for low than for high socially anxious

participants early in the conversation. Ironically, then, the more difficult situation resulted in lower anxiety, presumably because participants believed that any interpersonal problems they experienced during the interaction, including self-presentational difficulties, would be attributed to the noise rather than to their personal deficiencies.

In linking social anxiety to people's self-presentational concerns, the theory encompasses other theoretical approaches to social anxiety. For example, research has demonstrated a modest relationship between trait social anxiety and social skills deficits and shown that social skills training reduces shyness and social anxiety (Curran, 1977; Greco & Morris, 2005; Patterson & Ricks, 1997; Segrin, 1996). According to the self-presentational perspective, the relationship between social skills and social anxiety is explained by the fact that people who believe they have poor interpersonal skills doubt that they will make desired impressions on others (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). As a result, teaching them to interact more adeptly decreases their self-presentational concerns and lowers their anxiety in social encounters.

In support of this notion, independent observers were unable to distinguish between children who were high versus low in social anxiety (based on a video-recording of the child's interaction—Cartwright-Hatton, Tschernitz, and Gomersall, 2005), despite the fact that children who were high in social anxiety rated themselves as appearing significantly less socially skilled than children who were low in social anxiety. These results suggest that, although children with high social anxiety may not display outward manifestations of social skill deficits, they believe that they are less socially competent than children low in social anxiety.

Other researchers and practitioners have advocated a cognitive approach to social anxiety, arguing that certain patterns of thought—for example, holding excessively high standards, having negatively-biased views of oneself, and overemphasizing the importance of obtaining approval—lead to social anxiety (Hirsch & Clark, 2004; Kashdan & Savostyanova, 2011; Ledley & Heimberg, 2006; Lucock & Salkovskis, 1988; Pozo, Carver, Wellens, & Scheier, 1991; Sutton-Simon & Goldfried, 1979). Social anxiety can also arise because of expectations about the perceived discrepancy between other people's imagined or perceived reactions to the individual and what the standard reaction should be. In one study, participants who were preparing to give a speech were told that standards for performance were high, low, or ambiguous. Participants with social phobia rated their performance as worse in the high and ambiguous standards conditions but not in the low standards condition (Moscovitch & Hofmann, 2007). That is, when people with social phobia thought the audience had high expectations, they rated their performance as worse than when they thought the audience had low expectations. In addition, people who overestimate interpersonal threats or underestimate how others perceive and value them tend to score high in social anxiety (Foa, Franklin, Perry, & Herbert, 1996; Wallace & Alden, 1997).

Consistent with the cognitive perspective, a great deal of research supports the notion that certain kinds of thoughts underlie social anxiety and that modifying people's cognitions about themselves and their social worlds reduces social anxiety (Gould, Buckminster, Pollack, Otto, & Yap, 1997; Hartman, 1983; Hope, Gansler, & Heimberg, 1989; Lucock & Salkovskis, 1988). The self-presentation theory refines the cognitive approach by focusing on the fact that the thoughts that underlie social anxiety specifically involve or have implications for how people are perceived and evaluated by others.

Altogether, then, the evidence for the self-presentational theory is quite strong. The self-presentational perspective explains both situational and dispositional moderators of social anxiety and provides a parsimonious account that can incorporate other theoretical approaches. And, as we discuss later in the chapter, the self-presentational approach also offers insights regarding the most effective ways to treat problematic social anxiety.

EXTENDING THE SELF-PRESENTATION APPROACH: SOCIOMETER THEORY

Despite the theory's merits, it was clear from the beginning that not every instance of self-presentational concern causes people to experience social anxiety. Although all episodes of social anxiety appear to involve self-presentational concerns as the theory suggests, people do not feel socially anxious every time they think they will not make a particular desired impression. Self-presentational concern is a necessary but not always a sufficient cause of social anxiety.

Imagine, for example, that a woman has had a very difficult week at work, full of problems, stresses, and disappointments. She wants very badly to conceal the fact that she is stressed-out, frustrated, and disappointed from the friends she will meet for drinks on Friday evening, both because she doesn't want to undermine their fun and because she wants to be seen as someone who faces work pressures with equanimity. Yet, she doubts that she'll be able to be her normal, happy self, and, in fact, once with her friends, she believes that her emotional turmoil is obvious and that everyone knows that she is coming unglued. Although she is highly motivated to make a desired impression and doubts that she can maintain it—the two conditions posited to cause social anxiety according to the self-presentational perspective—we doubt that she would experience social anxiety.

If people do not always feel anxious about their self-presentational insecurities and failures, what variable allows us to account for the situations in which self-presentational difficulties do and do not cause people to feel anxious? Our view is that self-presentational concerns result in social anxiety primarily when people's concerns about others' impressions of them have real or imagined negative implications for their relational value. Relational value refers to the degree to which a person regards his or her relationship with another individual as valuable or important (Leary, 2001). The higher a person's relational value to other

people, the more likely they are to accept, support, and protect him or her, and the more they will provide a variety of desirable social and tangible outcomes, so people are generally motivated to maintain a sufficiently high level of relational value to other people.

People feel socially anxious when they believe that the impressions they make will not lead others to value their relationships with them as much as they desire, or worse, may cause others to devalue, avoid, or reject them. That is, consideration of one's relational value plays an important role in self-presentational social anxiety. In a study examining the roles that expectations of being rejected and concerns about impression management play in social anxiety, Baldwin and Main (2001) found that participants who were cued to think about being rejected during an interaction with a confederate felt more socially anxious than participants who were cued to think about being accepted and participants who were given a neutral cue. An adolescent on a first date, a job applicant in the interview, a performer on stage, and an ill-at-ease party-goer are worried not merely about making undesired impressions but specifically about making impressions that might diminish the degree to which other people value having relationships with them. In the previous example, the woman would probably not expect that her inability to appear relaxed and composed would affect the degree to which her friends value their relationships with her, so her self-presentational concerns would not lead her to feel socially anxious.

Human beings appear to possess a pervasive drive to form and maintain a minimum number of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships (p. 497). Baumeister and Leary (1995) reviewed considerable evidence showing that people not only choose to spend most of their time with other people, but they form social attachments easily and resist the dissolution of relationships that they form (even many seemingly insignificant ones). The universality and strength of the need for acceptance and belonging suggest that it likely evolved as a fundamental aspect of human nature because it conferred an adaptive advantage. If we consider the conditions under which *homo sapiens* and their homonid ancestors lived during the vast majority of evolutionary history, the advantage of having interpersonal relationships is easy to see. Living in small groups of hunters and gatherers on the African savannah, early humans were likely to survive predators, starvation, injury, and illness only with the mutual support of the individuals with whom they lived (Gilbert, 2001; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Prehistoric individuals who tried to live away from the clan—through choice, accident, or ostracism—were less likely to survive and reproduce than those who forged strong social bonds.

Given the vital importance of maintaining social connections throughout prehistory, a motivational-affective system evolved that helped people avoid jeopardizing their relationships with other people. This system allowed them to monitor, in an automatic and ongoing fashion, the degree to which they were being accepted and valued versus rejected and devalued by other people (Leary, 2006; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995). Because

people do not have the cognitive capacity to constantly monitor others' judgments of them on a conscious level, this system—the *sociometer*—typically operates in background mode, with little conscious awareness on the part of the individual. Although people sometimes consciously ponder how they are being perceived and evaluated by others, the sociometer typically monitors the social environment, including one's own behavior, at a preattentive level for indications of immediate or potential threats to one's relational value. These cues are often explicit—as when someone directly rejects us—but more often they are implicit, involving subtle verbal and nonverbal cues that convey others' disinterest or disapproval.

Social Anxiety as Output from the Sociometer

As long as the sociometer detects no impending threats to their relational value, people interact in a reasonably composed manner with a minimum of conscious self-reflection. Under such circumstances, people may not even be aware that they are monitoring others' reactions, although the ease with which potentially evaluative cues can evoke a response shows that the sociometer was active all along. The "cocktail party effect," in which a person who is engrossed in conversation nonetheless hears his or her name mentioned elsewhere in the hubbub of the party, demonstrates the system's ability to monitor the social environment for self-relevant cues in a nonconscious manner. Cooley (1902) made the same point when he suggested that people "live in the minds of others" without knowing that they do so.

When the sociometer detects evidence of a potential problem in a person's relational sphere, the system evokes a negative emotional response, causing the person to feel uneasy if not downright distressed. Baumeister and Tice (1990) proposed that the typical response to perceived social exclusion is anxiety, which may be true, but many other negative social emotions also reflect responses to real, imagined, or potential low relational value. When people feel jealous, embarrassed, guilty, hurt, or, most central to the present chapter, socially anxious, the precipitating cause appears to be real, imagined, or anticipated relational devaluation. These emotions differ from one another in terms of the cognitive appraisals that evoke them, their subjective feeling states, and their associated action tendencies, but they all involve perceived low relational value (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001).

Unlike other emotional reactions to potential threats to relational value such as jealousy, hurt feelings, and embarrassment, social anxiety is inherently anticipatory. People feel socially anxious when they believe they *might* make an impression that will lower their relational value. In order to help people to avoid devaluation and rejection, the sociometer must not only detect actual instances of low relational value, but it also must be sensitive to cues that indicate the mere possibility that one's acceptance by other people may be in jeopardy. For example, merely imagining an audience's expectations can create social anxiety

(Wong & Moulds, 2011). Before giving a speech, high and low socially anxious participants were randomly assigned to either imagine their performance compared to what they think is expected (i.e., to use anticipatory processing) or to be distracted. Anticipatory processing increased self-reported anxiety for both low and high trait socially anxious participants. In addition to feeling more anxious, high socially anxious participants who used anticipatory processing showed more physical signs of being anxious and gave speeches of lower quality than high socially anxious individuals who were distracted. Merely imagining making an impression that might lower one's relational value was associated with higher anxiety.

When anxiety forewarns them of the possibility of relational devaluation, people can behave in ways that lower the likelihood of devaluation. In fact, many of the behaviors that are associated with social anxiety—such as reticence, smiling, agreement with other people, and head-nodding—may reflect ways of conveying a minimally acceptable image of innocuous sociability when people expect that their efforts to make specific desired impressions will fail (Leary & Kowalski, 1995a). And even when they cannot avoid relational devaluation entirely, they will be motivated to take preemptive actions to buttress their relationships before the anticipated damage occurs. Viewed in this way, social anxiety may be regarded as an early warning signal for events that may lead to insufficiently low relational value, a warning that not only alerts people to possible relational difficulties but that motivates remedial self-presentations (Alden & Bieling, 1998; DePaulo et al., 1990).

As an early warning system, the sociometer is biased towards "false positives," sometimes detecting potential threats to relational value that may, in fact, turn out to be nothing. Just as a detection system for enemy missiles or for tornadoes will occasionally provoke false alarms because it is calibrated to maximize detection of all real threats, the sociometer may cause people to feel anxious regarding imagined, potential threats that never come to pass. Failing to detect a real threat to one's relational value is far more serious than occasionally interpreting benign cues as threatening. Thus, other people sometimes view a person's social anxiety as unnecessary or overblown, even though the anxious individual experiences the threat as quite real.

In addition to serving as a warning signal that alerts people to threats to their relational value, social anxiety interrupts ongoing behavior and induces a conscious assessment of the potential threat and the individual's ability to deal with it. Strong emotions serve to interrupt behavior, thereby stopping organisms from continuing to behave in ways that might have disastrous consequences (Frijda, 1986; Simon, 1967). As suggested earlier, as long as the sociometer is quietly operating below the level of awareness, people may interact with little conscious thought or self-awareness, but activation of the sociometer's early warning system causes people to stop what they are doing and take stock of their situation. Research shows that people who feel socially anxious are acutely self-aware (Patterson & Ritts, 1997). They think about how others are perceiving

and evaluating them and about their ability (or, often, inability) to cope with the situation, and they often have difficulty devoting their full attention to other things (Amir, Freshman, & Foa, 2002; Hartman, 1983; Hope et al., 1989). Self-preoccupation can be troubling to the self-focused individual, but it is an essential feature of social anxiety. If people are to protect the quality of their interpersonal relationships, they must consciously assess any challenges to relational value that arise.

The subjective experience of social anxiety serves one additional function. Because anxiety is inherently aversive, people try to avoid doing things that will make them anxious, and they take action to reduce anxiety when it occurs. As a result, anxiety motivates behavior that helps people to maintain desired public images, prodding people to take preemptive or remediative steps to protect their social bonds. For example, in order to relieve some of their social anxiety, people who do not think they can make a desired impression will use less preferred self-presentational strategies for which they have higher outcome expectancies (Schlenker & Leary, 1982).

Conceptualizing social anxiety from the standpoint of relational value makes it clear that, within bounds, social anxiety is not only functional but essential to interpersonal relations. Although the experience of anxiety is inherently unpleasant, people's interpersonal interests are protected by their capacity to experience social anxiety. People who are never socially anxious are not as careful to regulate others' perceptions and evaluations of them and, as a result, are more likely to behave in ways that offend and alienate others.

The Link to Self-Presentation

Sociometer theory views social anxiety as the output of a psychological system that helps people manage their interpersonal relationships. Although the role of self-presentational concerns is less obvious in this conceptualization than in the original self-presentation theory (Schlenker & Leary, 1982), self-presentation is in fact fundamentally involved.

People devalue and reject one another primarily on the basis of the impressions that they have formed (Leary, 1995). Whether accurate or inaccurate, certain impressions lead us to like, value, and accept another person, whereas other impressions lead to disliking, devaluation, and rejection. Thus, the proximal cause of low relational value is that one person holds an undesirable impression of another. People know this, of course, which is precisely why they are frequently concerned with the impressions that other people form of them and why they feel anxious when they do not believe they can make desired impressions.

Most instances in which people are ignored, shunned, excluded, or otherwise devalued center around four themes. Stated differently, people are most likely to devalue their relationships with those who make one of four general kinds of impressions on them. First, people are devalued when they appear to be inept, incompetent, or unskilled. Competence is particularly important when

one's value to other people depends on being able to perform certain tasks. The primitive hunter who misses the kill, the athlete who misses the shot, and the stock broker who misses the financial projection are less likely to be valued as members of their respective groups (as well as by the constituents of those groups) than a more highly skilled hunter, athlete, or financial analyst. Although we do not necessarily reject people who are incompetent, all other things being equal, people value their relationships with reasonably competent individuals more highly than their relationships with incompetent ones. Even competent romantic partners are generally preferred over those who are inept.

Second, relational value is often influenced by a person's physical appearance. Physically attractive people are liked better than unattractive ones, and people tend to devalue relationships with unattractive individuals (Feingold, 1992). Knowing this, most people work to meet the minimum standards of attractiveness in their social groups (through grooming, keeping their weight within acceptable bounds, choice of clothing, and so on), and, of course, many people strive to present a highly attractive image. To make matters worse, people who are anxious because they believe they will be rejected because of their unattractiveness are less willing to engage in social interactions (Park & Pinkus, 2009). This can lead to a cycle in which self-presentational concerns result in patterns of interpersonal behavior that increase the likelihood of social rejection, which then raises anxiety and even greater self-presentational concerns that further interfere with social relationships.

Third, people's acceptance may be jeopardized when they violate important group rules or standards. Minor violations of social norms lead people to be seen as inconsiderate or unsocialized; violations of important ethical guidelines result in being seen as immoral. In either case, people who deviate from group standards are typically devalued, and extreme deviants may be ostracized (Schachter, 1951).

Finally, people may be ignored, avoided, or rejected when they are simply unappealing as social interactants. We do not value our relationships with people whom we view as disagreeable, abrasive, boring, manipulative, or otherwise unpleasant as much as our relationships with people with whom it is more pleasant to interact (Jensen-Campbell, Adams, Perry, Workman, Furdella, & Egan, 2002).

Given the role that competence, attractiveness, adherence to group norms, and social desirability play in acceptance and rejection, people are understandably motivated to be perceived as competent, physically attractive, norm-abiding, and otherwise socially desirable. Most of the impressions that people try to convey of themselves can be subsumed within one of these four categories. Because these domains have the greatest implications for relational appreciation and devaluation, self-presentational doubts regarding whether one can successfully convey these kinds of images are most often associated with social anxiety.

The kinds of impressions that people most want to convey and, thus, the specific self-presentational concerns that are likely to arouse social anxiety, vary

across contexts and individuals. For example, one person may be quite anxious when she thinks others see her as incompetent but relatively unfazed if others regard her as nonconforming or unattractive. Another person may become socially anxious when others regard him as physically unappealing but worry little about maintaining appearances of being particularly competent. Counselors and psychotherapists dealing with a socially anxious client may wish to consider whether the client's self-presentational concerns involve his or her global social image or only particular kinds of impressions.

SOCIAL ANXIETY AND INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIOR

When people feel socially anxious, they generally become inhibited and reticent, more concerned with protecting their social images than with promoting themselves. As a result, they tend to interact with others in a safe, innocuously sociable manner, engaging, for example, in more polite smiling, agreeableness, and head-nodding (see Patterson & Ritts, 1997, for a review and meta-analysis).

Earlier discussions interpreted these behaviors primarily in terms of their self-presentational functions, suggesting that innocuously sociable behaviors minimize the likelihood of making blatantly undesired impressions on other people when the person does not expect to make desired impressions (Leary & Kowalski, 1995a; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Although engaging in these safe behaviors may prevent full-blown self-presentational disasters, disaffiliation, quietness, protective self-presentations, and innocuous sociability are unlikely to make the sorts of desirable impressions people usually wish to convey. In fact, although socially anxious people often engage in these interpersonal behaviors to protect their social image, these behaviors can actually cause others to perceive them as disinterested, aloof, conceited, bored, or unlikable (Cheek & Buss, 1981; Clark & Wells, 1995; Langston & Cantor, 1989; Leary & Kowalski, 1995a; Meleshko & Alden, 1993).

Not surprisingly, then, high social anxiety is related to lower relationship quality. Socially anxious people tend to have fewer friendships, poorer quality relationships, and less social support in close friendships (Cuming & Rapee, 2010; La Greca & Lopez, 1998), and these patterns may be due to their overuse of safe, innocuous behaviors to protect their social image and relational value. For example, socially anxious people's responses to their romantic partners are often interpreted as unenthusiastic and lacking support which is related to a greater likelihood of relationship problems (Kashdan, Ferssizidis, Farmer, Adams, & McKnight, 2013). In addition, socially anxious people engage in less self-disclosure to both strangers and close others, which may contribute to less intimate and satisfying relationships (Cuming & Rapee, 2010). When socially anxious people do not fear losing relational value, they tend to self-disclose in the same way as less socially anxious individuals (Alden & Bieling, 1998; DePaulo et al., 1990). Put differently, when socially anxious people believe that

their self-presentational failures do not have implications for their relational value, they engage in fewer innocuous, safe behaviors.

These findings suggest that, although socially anxious people feel better when they can use these safe interpersonal behaviors, behaving in these ways may lead them to make less than optimal impressions, remain concerned with how they are being viewed, and rob them of the affirmation and relational value that would help to reduce their social concerns. If so, training people to push beyond these protective behaviors may help to ameliorate social anxiety. Indeed, engaging in fewer safe behaviors leads people to report less negative and more accurate self-evaluations and to view negative social outcomes as less likely (Taylor & Alden, 2010).

IMPLICATIONS FOR TREATMENT

Much of the empirical interest in social anxiety has focused on people who experience high levels of social anxiety—those who score high on measures of trait social anxiety or are diagnosed as having social anxiety disorder or being socially phobic. The sociometer approach provides a novel perspective on the sources of trait social anxiety, as well as suggestions for its treatment.

Antecedents of Trait Social Anxiety

The sociometer theory of social anxiety suggests that individual differences in social anxiety should be related to the degree to which people desire to be valued and accepted, as well as to the degree to which they perceive that others do, in fact, value and accept them. Scattered evidence supports this notion (see Miller, 2009, for a review). For example, Inderbitzen, Walters, and Bukowski (1997) found that adolescents who were identified as "neglected" and "rejected" by their peers scored significantly higher in social anxiety than "average" and "popular" adolescents. Because people who exist on the periphery of social life are likely to perceive that they have lower relational value to others than more central individuals, they are more prone to social anxiety. In addition, among people who are highly attuned to other's perceptions of them (e.g., highly perfectionist people), negative social feedback is associated with greater social anxiety (Nepon, Flett, Hewitt, & Molnar, 2011).

More direct evidence regarding the link between perceived acceptance and social anxiety was provided by Spivey (1990), who examined the relationship between trait social anxiety and both inclusionary status (generalized beliefs in the degree to which one is valued, accepted, and included by others) and exclusion motivation (the motive to avoid rejection and exclusion). As expected, trait social anxiety correlated negatively with inclusionary status (indicating that participants who felt less accepted were more socially anxious) and positively with exclusion motivation (indicating that the more motivated participants were to avoid rejection, the more anxious they tended to be). Furthermore, people

who were both high in exclusion motivation and low in inclusionary status were particularly prone to social anxiety, as the theory predicts.

As noted, people who are worried about others' perceptions and evaluations of them tend to be socially anxious, as are those who doubt that others perceive them as they desire (see Leary & Kowalski, 1995a; Miller, 2009). Given the effects of people's public images on the degree to which they are accepted versus rejected, these findings are easily subsumed under a model that attributes social anxiety to concerns with relational value.

Treating Trait Social Anxiety and Social Anxiety Disorder

Various approaches have been proposed for the treatment of trait social anxiety and social anxiety disorder: cognitive therapies that focus on changing clients' beliefs about themselves and their social interactions, social skills training that teaches socially unskilled clients more adroit ways of interacting with other people, practice interactions in which clients are given experience dealing with threatening social encounters, relaxation-based techniques such as systematic desensitization, and so on. All of these approaches have been demonstrated to be effective in lowering social anxiety in at least some instances (see Gould et al., 1997; Leary & Kowalski, 1995b; Rapee, Gaston, & Abbott, 2009).

For our purposes, the important point is that sociometer theory suggests that treatments for trait social anxiety and social anxiety disorder will be maximally effective if they focus on clients' concerns regarding their relational value to other people. Indeed, according to the theory, relaxation-based approaches aside, psychological treatments for social anxiety have their effects by influencing clients' perceptions of and reactions to their relational value. For example, cognitive therapies either lower clients' desire for acceptance or enhance their personal sense of social acceptability, and behavioral treatments (such as skills training) increase clients' ability to behave in ways that lead to affirming, accepting reactions from other people.

Viewing social anxiety as a response to potentially low relational value suggests ways of enhancing the effectiveness of these treatments. First, the treatments should focus on clients' concerns regarding their acceptability to other people rather than on self-acceptance. As we have seen, people feel socially anxious because they are worried about how other people value them, so bolstering their private self-images, although possibly effective, is at best an indirect way to lower social anxiety. On the other hand, convincing socially anxious clients that other people value them should be effective (Haemmerlie & Montgomery, 1982, 1984).

Second, counselors and psychotherapists should make an effort to determine whether a particular client's social anxiety is reasonable given their circumstances. Although many people are excessively concerned with being accepted and underestimate the degree to which they are valued, some individuals are anxious because they accurately detect that they have low relational value in

one or more domains of their lives. For example, socially inept, disagreeable, or abrasive individuals may be socially anxious, assuming that their sociometers are working properly, because they behave in ways that undermine relational value and acceptance (Clark & Wells, 1995; Greco & Morris, 2005; Langston & Cantor, 1989; Meleshko & Alden, 1993). Even well-adjusted, socially desirable people may become highly socially anxious when they find themselves in unsupportive social environments in which they feel inadequately valued. In the first instance, therapeutic efforts should be directed toward improving clients' relational acceptability as opposed to trying to convince them of their inherent worth as people or persuading them not to be concerned with other people's reactions. In the second instance, the client may be assured by the simple knowledge that his or her anxiety is a reasonable, functional reaction to the social context, accurately reflecting the absence of regular contact with people who value their relationships with him or her.

In either case, the counselor or psychotherapist may wish to consider whether a particular client's anxiety arises from concerns with his or her relationships with people in general or with a select few individuals. Although this issue has not been previously addressed, it seems likely that some socially anxious individuals are concerned about their social acceptability to other people in general, whereas other individuals are concerned primarily about being accepted by certain people or categories of people (e.g., members of the other sex, other professionals, customers).

Third, given that the proximal cause of people's concerns with their relational value involves the impressions that they think others are forming of them, treatments might fruitfully focus on the client's self-presentational concerns. Given that people may be highly socially anxious for a variety of specific self-presentational reasons, different treatment approaches are needed depending on the precise nature of the client's self-presentational difficulties (Leary, 1987). For example, a close analysis of two clients' idiosyncratic difficulties may show that one holds unrealistic expectations regarding how positively she should be regarded in order to feel valued and accepted, whereas the other client has realistic self-presentational expectations but is excessively motivated to make favorable impressions and to be accepted. The first case may require efforts to create more realistic expectations regarding the client's social image, and the second case could profitably focus on reducing the client's excessive approval motivation. Specific kinds of self-presentational concerns may underlie specific cases of social anxiety and possible treatment approaches for each (Leary, 1987; Leary & Kowalski, 1995a, b).

CONCLUSIONS

People appear to be innately prepared to detect and respond to threats involving their acceptance by other people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary et al., 2001). According to sociometer theory, social anxiety may be conceptualized as the

emotional output of an early warning system that is designed to detect low relational value in advance of actual rejection so that the person may take steps to protect relationships that may be in jeopardy. Because the degree to which others value their relationships with the individual depends primarily on their impressions of him or her, indications that one is unable to make desired impressions raise the specter of relational devaluation and evoke social anxiety.

The advantages of this refinement and extension of the self-presentational theory over the original formulation are two-fold. First, as noted at the outset, people do not always experience social anxiety when they are worried about others' impressions of them, and tying social anxiety to the sociometer allows us to specify more precisely when social anxiety will and will not arise. Specifically, social anxiety should occur primarily when people believe that the impressions that others may form of them have undesired implications for their relational value.

Second, consideration of the adaptive significance of social anxiety as a means of avoiding rejection permits us to incorporate the construct within a broader theoretical framework that links it to the fundamental motivation to be accepted (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), self-evaluation (Leary & Downs, 1995), self-presentation (Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 2012), and various emotions that are involved in negotiating social life, such as embarrassment, hurt feelings, jealousy, pride, guilt, and shame (Leary et al., 2001). To date, research on people's concerns with others' impressions, evaluations, and acceptance of them has been scattered among a number of disparate topics, such as self-presentation, evaluation apprehension, social anxiety, embarrassment, interpersonal rejection, stigmatization, ostracism, approval motivation, hurt feelings, and betrayal (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). Recognizing that each of these phenomena involves people's concerns with relational value may provide an overarching framework for integrating research across these topics.

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