NEGATIVE EVALUATION IS THE FEARED CONSEQUENCE OF MAKING OTHERS UNCOMFORTABLE: A RESPONSE TO RECTOR, KOCOVSKI, AND RYDER

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Rector, Kocovski, and Ryder (2006, this issue) suggest that fear of causing discomfort to others is a unique form of social anxiety and that focusing on this concern may be clinically helpful. We argue that the fear of causing discomfort to others is dependent upon fear of negative evaluation, and provide evidence from the domains of evolutionary psychology, personality psychology, self-regulation theory, and our own clinical experience that support this argument. Given that fear of causing discomfort to others is dependent upon fear of negative evaluation, it is well addressed by current empirically supported cognitive behavioral interventions. Thus, although fear of causing discomfort to others may ultimately prove to be a useful construct, further evidence is required to demonstrate that it provides unique insights regarding social anxiety or social anxiety disorder.

Therapist: So you’re having the thought, “I’ll embarrass them,” but why does that thought impact you the way it does...?
Client: Two things: One, that they won’t like me. And the second, that, I don’t know. [Pause] I just care too much about what other people think.

—A recent therapist-client exchange at our clinic

Rector, Kocovski, and Ryder (2006, this issue) raise some interesting points in their argument regarding a dimension of social anxiety focused specifically on the fear of causing discomfort to others (Rector, Kocovski, & Ryder, in press). It seems clear that fear of causing discom-

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fort to others can contribute to one's experience of social anxiety before, during, and after a social interaction. However, it seems uncertain to us that fear of causing discomfort to others is a unique construct, given its close relation to the fear of negative evaluation by others. In short, we would like to see more empirical evidence before deciding that fear of causing discomfort to others is a unique and primary form of social anxiety. Regardless, we disagree with Rector et al.'s contention that current manualized treatments do not address fear of causing discomfort to others. Existing manualized treatments focus on the concerns of persons with social anxiety, as reflected in their reported automatic thoughts about social situations. These thoughts typically concern fear of negative evaluation, but it is the idiosyncratic thoughts of individual clients that are confronted in treatment. When these thoughts concern causing discomfort to others, they are very much a focus of treatment (e.g., Heimberg & Becker, 2002; see below).

Rector and colleagues (2006, this issue) argue that fear of causing discomfort to others may be experienced in the absence of fear of negative evaluation by others. They describe these fears as focusing on the anticipated consequences of one's own anxiety for the well-being of others rather than the anticipated consequences of anxiety for oneself. They argue that, unlike the fear of negative evaluation, these fears focus on the likelihood and consequences of one's own anxiety provoking discomfort in or offense to others. This argument stands in contrast to the vast body of research suggesting that fear of negative evaluation is the root of social anxiety. Schlenker and Leary (1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1995) describe social anxiety as arising from the prospect or presence of interpersonal (negative) evaluation in real or imagined social settings. Diagnostically, the essential criterion for social anxiety disorder is a marked and persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations in which the individual fears that he or she will act in a way that will be humiliating or embarrassing (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 411). Beck, Emery, and Greenberg (1985) discuss social anxiety disorder in their chapter titled "The Evaluation Anxieties" (p. 146), highlighting the central role that fear of evaluation by others is believed to play in the experience of social anxiety.

Rector et al. (2006, this issue) propose that the above conceptions lack a specific place for fears of making others uncomfortable or anxious through displays of one's own anxiety. However, we believe that both empirical data and logic dictate that discomforting or offending others should generate social anxiety only to the degree to which it increases the potential for negative social evaluation and ultimate exclusion from the social group. Thus, when applicable for a particular client, causing discomfort in others is one of many (potentially important) factors that
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may generate fears of negative evaluation and the resultant experience of social anxiety. We believe that this point holds regardless of one’s cultural orientation as individualistic or collectivistic (see below).

As Rector and colleagues (2006, this issue) argue, there are good evolutionary explanations of selection for the tendency toward maintenance of social ties. It seems reasonable that such evolutionary pressures would lead to a moderate level of personality traits that are related to social connectedness, such as agreeableness. Specifically, agreeableness would be expected to be related to kindness and concern toward others. Indeed, Ashton, Paunonen, Helmes, and Jackson (1998) found that agreeableness was consistently and moderately related to two forms of altruism.

If fear of causing discomfort to others is a primary form of social anxiety, several predictions follow from the above argument and findings. First, it should be related to altruism and, therefore, agreeableness. Accordingly, people with social anxiety disorder should have higher levels of agreeableness, and higher levels of agreeableness should be more apparent among people with more severe social anxiety. Further, the personality traits that relate to social anxiety should also be related to altruism. However, the literature as a whole fails to support these points. Social anxiety disorder is related to lower extraversion and higher neuroticism (e.g., Bienvenu et al., 2004). Rector et al. (2006, this issue) report on a study finding that participants with social anxiety disorder have higher tender-mindedness (a facet of agreeableness). However, in contrast to this finding, Bienvenu et al. reported that participants with social anxiety disorder had lower trust (another facet of agreeableness) than people without an anxiety disorder, and the two groups did not differ in overall agreeableness. The finding of Bienvenu et al. is bolstered by findings that avoidant personality disorder, considered by some to be essentially a more severe form of social anxiety disorder (e.g., Heimberg, 1996), is associated primarily with higher neuroticism, lower extraversion, and, to a lesser degree, lower levels of agreeableness (e.g., Saulsman & Page, 2004), and lower levels of trust (e.g., Quirk, Christiansen, Wagner, & McNulty, 2003). In contrast to findings regarding agreeableness, social anxiety is related to higher neuroticism, as described above, which is also related to fear of negative evaluation (Cowdon, 2005). Thus, the literature as a whole does not support a link between agreeableness and social anxiety, whereas it does support links between social anxiety, neuroticism, and fear of negative evaluation.

Social anxiety disorder might still be related strongly to higher altruism if lower extraversion or higher neuroticism were related to altruism, but this does not appear to be the case in a straightforward way. Rather, Ashton et al. (1998) reported that neuroticism, in addition to having in-
consistent relationships, also had consistently smaller relationships with different types of altruism than did agreeableness. The authors speculated that neuroticism might provide the drive that fuels both enhanced avoidance of breaking social ties and decreased likelihood of repairing ties that are already broken. Given these results, we would be interested in whether, in the study reported by Rector et al. (2006, this issue), the relationship between tender-mindedness and social anxiety would remain once neuroticism was controlled.

Regardless of its trait bases, anxiety in social situations has been postulated as the primary emotion involved in the avoidance of social rejection (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1995), in that the experience of anxiety may lead to attempts to avoid making an undesired impression or to remediate previously made undesired impressions, thus reducing the likelihood of social exclusion. Social anxiety can thus be understood as having evolved as a mechanism for minimizing the risk of social exclusion (e.g., Gilbert, 2001). Thus, in situations in which an individual perceives the possibility of causing discomfort in others, it follows that the evolutionary root of any resulting anxiety is in the fear of negative evaluation and the resulting divestment of resources by the social group (Gilbert, 2001).

It may also be useful to consider the issue from the point of view of self-regulatory theory (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998), in which it is hypothesized that human behavior is driven by goals that are arranged in a hierarchy. The goal avoid causing discomfort to others, from our point of view, would be a lower-level goal, the progress toward which provides feedback about one's success in achieving the goal avoid negative evaluation. We propose this hierarchy based on our observation that (nearly) all instances of discomfort in others that lead to fear (and not another emotion) do so because of the fear of consequential negative evaluation, but not all forms of negative evaluation that elicit fear do so because one fears causing others discomfort.

Although Rector et al. (2006, this issue) state that some clients focus on the fear of causing discomfort in the absence of fear of negative evaluation, we are unable to find an example in their article in which fear of causing discomfort appears to be dissociated from fear of negative evaluation. The authors offer the following examples:

For instance, a patient described feeling apprehensive about attending a movie in the theater in fear that if she became anxious and had to escape it would ruin it for her friends. Another patient declined the invitation to go on a double date because he feared that his anxiety would make the other couple uncomfortable and spoil the night. Other patients have
reported fearing that their anxiety in social situations will disrupt others' ability to perform socially.

In each case, the question "And then what would happen?" leads naturally to the potential for negative evaluation: If I ruin this experience for my friends, they will be mad at me (and may not want to be friends anymore) (see also below). Monitoring the discomfort of others provides potential information regarding the likelihood of negative evaluation, but monitoring negative evaluation gives little information regarding the discomfort that others are experiencing. It logically follows that, in socially anxious individuals, avoidance of negative evaluation is at a higher level in the person's hierarchy of goals. Both in our clinical experience, and in terms of evolutionary explanations for social anxiety (e.g., Gilbert, 2001), making others uncomfortable has consequences (eliciting the negative evaluation of others toward oneself or one's identified group) and it is these consequences, not merely the trigger for these consequences, that elicit fear.

The authors have argued that research regarding fears of causing discomfort to others has thus far been focused in forms of social anxiety specific to particular cultures, such as Taijin Kyofusho (Takahashi, 1972) and anthropophobia (Zhang, Yu, Draguns, Zhang, & Tang, 2000). However, not all collectivist cultures display prominent fears of causing discomfort, and the authors' own claims rest upon the assumption that such fears are present in individualistic cultures—it is thus unclear how the authors believe the dimension of individualism versus collectivism to be related to the fear of causing discomfort to others. The authors further argue that there are notable distinctions between individualistic and collectivistic beliefs and appraisals that would uniquely provoke the experience of social anxiety. We have difficulty understanding what the important differences are or how they generate distinct sources of social anxiety. In contrast, our experience has been that all situations that produce social anxiety are ones in which there is the presence or prospect of negative evaluation by others (of oneself or one's social group).

The authors suggest that fear of causing discomfort to others is not routinely targeted in manualized cognitive–behavioral treatments (CBTs) of social anxiety disorder. In fact, manual–based CBT does address such concerns, although the fear of causing discomfort to others is targeted within the more general context of fear of evaluation by others. For example, an anecdote related by Heimberg and Becker (2002, p. 220) concerns a client who had such concerns. This client feared that, due to her anxiety, she would shake, spill a drink, and cause others to be uncomfortable. As indicated by the protocol, the client was asked about the
consequences she expected for making people uncomfortable. She stated that the party guests, who were business associates of her husband, would be angry with her husband, who would then be angry with her and divorce her. Cognitive restructuring and exposure was used to modify her beliefs regarding the likelihood that she would spill a drink and the consequences of doing so. This client benefited from treatment and was doing well the last time she contacted one of the authors (two years post-treatment). This client’s sequence of thoughts clearly illustrates the link between fear of causing discomfort to others and fear of negative evaluation that we have invariably encountered in clients. Indeed, if manualized treatments have not focused on fears of causing discomfort to others, it is probably because we are not aware of having ever encountered a client who experienced these fears in the absence of fears of negative evaluation. In essence, what remains is the empirical question of whether fear of causing discomfort to others ever occurs without being driven by fear of negative evaluation.

In their own example, Rector and colleagues (2006, this issue) show that using the downward arrow (itself a standard cognitive-behavioral technique) in reference to fears of causing discomfort to others leads to cognitions related to the fear of negative evaluation. Current protocols (e.g., Heimberg & Becker, 2002) would therefore suggest testing the relationship between the person’s behavior and the possibility of causing discomfort to others, as well as the relationship between causing discomfort to others and the possibility of negative evaluation. Conceptually, this is no different than the way fears based on the possibility of being evaluated poorly while giving a speech are handled. Perhaps not surprisingly, the authors’ example of using a pie chart is specifically described in existing protocols for dealing with the perceived connections between feeling anxiety, showing anxiety, other people noticing the anxiety, and negative evaluation (see, e.g., Heimberg & Becker, 2002, Chapter 12; Hope, Heimberg, Juster, & Turk, 2000, Chapter 11). Other people noticing the anxiety, mentioned above, can easily be replaced by other people being made uncomfortable by the anxiety. The therapeutic technique remains the same; it is only the content that differs. Thus, a client who brings up concerns about causing discomfort to others in this context would be treated according to the recommendations of Rector et al., in that these recommendations are closely aligned to the procedures that would be suggested in existing manual-based CBT for social anxiety disorder.

CONCLUSION

Rector et al. (2006, this issue) describe fear of causing discomfort to others as a unique form of social anxiety and suggest the need to focus on it
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clinically. We argue that it is dependent upon the fear of negative evaluation and provide evidence from the domains of evolutionary psychology, personality psychology, and self-regulation theory, and our own clinical experience that support this argument. Although the asserted centrality of fear of causing discomfort to others would lead to the expectation that social anxiety is related to the trait of agreeableness, the literature as a whole provides little support for this hypothesis and instead suggests that neuroticism is more strongly related to both social anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Evolutionary theory traces social anxiety to the possibility that negative evaluation can lead to decreased chances of survival. Finally, adopting a self-regulatory stance and looking at goals from a hierarchical perspective, the goal of avoiding causing discomfort in others seems to function in the service of the goal of avoiding negative evaluation. Given that fear of causing discomfort to others is dependent upon fear of negative evaluation, it is well addressed by current empirically supported cognitive behavioral interventions. However, it may be helpful for clinicians to be made aware of how these concerns may be addressed within standard treatment protocols.

REFERENCES


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