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When the heat is on: Romantic partner responses influence distress in socially anxious women

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Abstract

This study provided a preliminary test of whether socially anxious women and their partners would show more negative social support behavior, especially among those with low relationship satisfaction, and whether this would increase the distress of the socially anxious women. Women with ($n = 22$) and without ($n = 23$) heightened social anxiety were observed interacting with their partners under a social-evaluative threat and support behaviors were coded. Unexpectedly, no differences were found between socially and non-socially anxious women and their partners. Although relationship satisfaction influenced this process, it was the more satisfied women who showed more negative behavior. Additionally, the more positive behaviors the partner exhibited, the greater was the distress reported by socially anxious women, particularly among women whose partners reported high relationship satisfaction. Implications for how these findings might expand theories on interpersonal processes in social anxiety are discussed.

Keywords: Social anxiety; Interpersonal processes; Romantic relationships

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Introduction

Social anxiety (SA) is a prevalent condition that falls on a continuum, with social anxiety disorder (SAD) at the extreme (Heimberg, Dodge, & Becker, 1987; Kessler et al., 1994). People with moderate to extreme levels of SA experience considerable social impairment (Davidson, Hughes, George, & Blazer, 1994; Schneier, et al., 1994). Still, many do form close relationships (albeit fewer relative to people without SA; Schneier et al., 1994). Despite this, little is known about functioning in the relationships of people with SA. Are they impaired? If so, in what ways? In this study, we focus on romantic relationships of women high and low in SA, in a preliminary effort to examine whether SA influences interpersonal processes in close relationships.

Much of our knowledge about interpersonal behaviors of people with SA comes from studies using structured role-play and related behavioral assessments (McNeil, Reis, & Turk, 1995), which document anxious, submissive, and avoidant behaviors in stranger interactions (e.g., Leary, Knight, & Johnson, 1987; Schlenker, 1987; Walters & Hope, 1998). This limits our understanding of interpersonal functioning and SA, as behavior in close relationships easily may differ from behavior with unknown others. As Alden (2001) suggests, the behavior of people with SA is strategic—it changes depending on whether they are trying to avoid negative evaluation or maintain closeness (see also Leary & Kowalski, 1995; Schlenker & Leary, 1982), the latter of which may be more prominent in close relationships than in stranger relationships. Data also attest to the presence of behaviors in close relationships that are not typically seen in stranger interactions, particularly dependent behaviors (e.g., Bruch, Rivet, Heimberg, Hunt & McIntosh, 1999; Darcy, Davila, & Beck, 2005). To date, one study has examined communication among people high and low in SA and their romantic partners, using structured conversations, and found that people with high SA displayed more negative communication behaviors, particularly during discussion of relationship problems (Wenzel, Graff-Dolezal, Macho, & Brendle, 2005). Although intriguing, these findings are preliminary and warrant greater study.

In this study, we focused on women high and low in SA and how they relate with their romantic partner when facing a social-evaluative threat. We focused on social support behaviors, defined as how partners help each other cope with a difficult situation unrelated to their relationship (Pasch, Bradbury, & Sullivan, 1997). The ability of partners to seek and provide support is one of the foundations of adaptive couple functioning and one of the best predictors of relationship satisfaction and stability (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Skills necessary for adaptive support behavior are likely to be impaired by SA in the individual and couple. Social avoidance might result in lack of support seeking by the anxious person. Alternatively, dependence might result in excessive support seeking or over-reliance on the partner. Partners of anxious women who are poor at seeking support may behave, in turn, negatively, possibly recoiling from or being annoyed by excessive support seeking, or being intrusive or controlling in the face of avoidance. As such, support behaviors seem a likely candidate for the manifestation of SA in the interactions of romantic couples.

We focused on women with and without high SA, given that SAD is more prevalent in women (Kessler et al., 1994). They were asked to prepare a talk that would be videotaped and later rated. While preparing the talk, the couple was secretly videotaped. Three hypotheses were tested, although we recognized that these were speculative owing to the lack of prior studies on this topic. First, socially anxious females and their partners were expected to show more negative support

seeking and provision, relative to non-socially anxious women and their partners. Second, because relationship dissatisfaction often sets the stage for negative interactions (see Heyman, 2001), we hypothesized that this effect would be magnified among couples reporting greater dissatisfaction. Third, relative to women without SA, we speculated that women with SA would show more distress when their partner behaves in a more negative fashion. That is, in the face of a social-evaluative threat, when a partner is unsupportive, it would make the socially anxious woman feel much worse than her non-socially anxious counterpart. This hypothesis was based on the idea that unsupportive behavior would convey a negative evaluation of the socially anxious woman by the partner, which would then increase her distress.

Method

Participants

Female undergraduates ($n = 45$) in Introductory Psychology and their romantic partners ($n = 44$, male; $n = 1$, female) participated. Women had to be between the ages of 18 and 22, currently involved in a romantic relationship for at least three months,[1,2] and their partners had to attend the study with them. Mean age of the sample was 19.4 years ($M = 18.7$, SD = 1.0, identified participants (IPs); $M = 20.1$, SD = 2.1, romantic partners (RPs)). Median parental income was $51,000–60,000. Among the IPs, 86.7% identified as Caucasian, 6.7% as Asian, 4.4% as African American, and 2.2% as Latina. Among the RPs, 77.8% identified as Caucasian, 6.7% as African American, 4.4% as Latino, 2.2% as Chicano, 2.2% as Pacific Islander, and 4.4% endorsed "other." Mean relationship length was 17.6 months (SD = 11.1, range 4–54 months). There was one married couple and one same sex (female) couple.

IPs who met inclusion criteria were recruited based on scores on the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS; Mattick & Clarke, 1998), a 20-item self-report measure that assesses fears of general social interaction. Women scoring above 34 and below 20 were recruited for the high SA (HSA; $n = 22$) and low SA (LSA; $n = 23$) groups, respectively. Cut scores were derived using a community mean plus one standard deviation (Heimberg, Mueller, Holt, Hope, & Liebowitz, 1992). HSA and LSA groups did not differ on demographics (see Table 1).

[1]The second author reviewed close relationship studies published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology since 1987 that used dating samples. Virtually all used undergraduate samples with no selection criteria and reported relationship lengths from 1 month to 5 years. Studies with selection criteria largely used 3 months as duration criteria, although some were longer or shorter. The present study is consistent with this precedent.

[2]There was evidence in our sample that the identified participants and their partners were highly committed to one another and experienced their relationships as intimate. Participants and partners completed the commitment and intimacy subscales of the perceived relationship quality components inventory (PRQC; Fletcher et al., 2000 Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). Each subscale contains 3 items, which are answered on a 7-point Likert scale. Scores are averaged across items, with higher scores indicating greater levels of commitment or intimacy. Mean scores for identified participants were 6.6 (SD = .65) for commitment and 6.4 (SD = .68) for intimacy. For their partners, mean scores were 6.3 (SD = 1.0) for commitment and 6.2 (SD = .91) for intimacy. This suggests high levels of commitment and intimacy among the couples in this study.

Table 1
Comparison of HSA and LSA groups on demographic information and self-report measures

	HSA group ($n = 22$)		LSA group ($n = 23$)		
Variables	*M*	SD	*M*	SD	*p*
Identified participants					
Length of relationship (in months)	19.93	13.02	15.28	8.60	.163
Age (in years)	18.77	1.19	18.70	0.88	.805
Ethnicity (% Caucasian)	81.8		91.3		.349
Family income (% < $50,000)	47.6		40.0		.623
Social phobia scale	19.91	11.43	12.30	6.92	.010
Social phobia anxiety inventory	77.63	23.22	32.10	19.55	.000
Beck depression inventory	5.91	4.45	5.35	4.15	.664
Romantic partners					
Age (in years)	19.91	2.45	20.35	1.75	.491
Ethnicity (% caucasian)	77.3		78.3		.936
Family income (% < $50,000)	36.4		26.1		.457
Social phobia scale	14.00	13.33	14.04	11.35	.991
Social phobia anxiety inventory	41.24	26.64	47.33	26.30	.445
Beck depression inventory	6.27	7.21	4.13	5.05	.253

Procedure

All procedures were approved by the IRB at the University at Buffalo—SUNY. Couples attended an in-person session. After providing informed consent, IPs and RPs completed questionnaires in separate rooms. To obtain naturalistic observations of HSAs and LSAs interacting with partners, an anxiety mood manipulation was employed. Upon completion of questionnaires, couples were reunited and asked to complete the affect measure while waiting for the next phase of the study. Then the experimenter returned and said:

> There is one more part to this experiment. For this part, I would like (name of IP) to prepare and deliver a four-minute talk. This talk will be videotaped and viewed later by several professors and graduate students. Although this study is about relationships in college students, the last part of the experiment is designed to give additional information. It is extremely important that you do the best job that you can with this talk. I would like for you to spend the next five minutes outlining your talk and (name of RP) can help if you'd like. Your talk should be about the most difficult time in your life and how you coped with it.

The experimenter left after answering questions, and the couple was videotaped for 5 min. The experimenter returned and asked both people to again complete the affect measure. The couple was then told that the video equipment was not working, and the IP would not have to complete the speech. Finally, the IPs and RPs were asked to list three favorite things about their partner, to reduce any negative mood prior to leaving. Participants then were partially debriefed, including disclosure that they had been taped after the IP was asked to prepare a speech. Participants were

given the option to withdraw their data if they objected to the videotaping. IPs received course credit for participating.

Measures

Social support behavior

Social support seeking and provision was assessed using a modified version of the Social Support Interaction Coding System (SSICS; Bradbury & Pasch, 1992). The original SSICS is a microanalytic system in which each speech turn of the helpee and the helper are coded for positive and negative behaviors. In this study, the SSICS was modified for use as a global coding system in which one rating for each type of behavior was made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (0) not at all to (4) extremely.[3] Global coding of unstructured interactions has been used successfully in other studies (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Orina, 2002). In addition to modifying the SSICS into a global coding scheme, one additional code for the helper and the helpee was added. For the helper, we added a code for positive physical behavior (PP; e.g., physical affection or comfort, moving physically closer to helpee), as pilot coding revealed the presence of such behavior for many couples. For the helpee, we added a code for on-task behavior (OT; e.g., the extent to which she engaged in the task of writing the speech) because she was given a specific task to accomplish. A list of the codes and their interrater reliabilities are presented in Table 2. Because we had no a priori predictions about the scales and preliminary analyses indicated that they performed similarly, we created two composite variables. The first, helper behavior (support provision), was the mean of helper PI, PE, PO, PP, and N (reverse scored). The second, helpee behavior (support seeking), was the mean of helpee P, N (reverse scored), and OT. Higher scores reflected more positive behavior.

Relationship satisfaction

Participants completed the satisfaction subscale of the perceived relationship quality components inventory (PRQC; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000), which contains 3 items that are rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Scores are averaged across items, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction. Cronbach's α was .94.

Positive and negative affect

The positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) consists of two 10-item scales measuring positive (e.g., excited, proud) and negative (e.g., upset, scared) affect that are rated on a 5-point scale of how the participant feels "at the moment". Watson et al. (1988) report adequate reliability and validity. Cronbach's α for this sample was .91 for positive and .87 for negative affect.

[3]Global coding reflects overall level of behavior during the entire 5-minute period and was selected because of the unstructured nature of the task. In structured tasks, where partners are directed to have a conversation about a specific topic, it is appropriate to code speech turns of each partner. With an unstructured discussion, speech turns are not always evident, nor are couples always on-task.

Table 2
Social support codes and interrater reliabilities

Social support code	Description	Intraclass correlation
Helper		
PI	Specific, helpful questions, information, or advice	.73
PE	Reassurance, encouragement, validation	.65
PP	Physical affection or comfort, moving physically closer to helpee	.84
PO	All other positive behaviors that facilitate the discussion	.72
N	Criticism, rejection, blaming, minimization or exaggeration of problem, being inattentive or disengaged	.61
Composite	Mean of helper ratings	.77
Helpee		
P	Specific, clear analysis of problem, clear statement of feelings, asking for help or stating needs in a useful way, responding positively to helper	.75
N	Demanding help, criticizing, blaming, accusing, or rejecting helper, whining or complaining	.89
OT	The extent to which helpee engages in the task of writing the speech	.71
Composite	Mean of helpee ratings	.90

Notes: PI = positive instrumental; PE = positive emotional; PP = positive physical; PO = positive other; N = negative; P = positive; OT = on task. Interrater reliability was calculated in the following way. Four undergraduate assistants were trained in the coding system by the second author (J.D.), who served as the expert coder to which the other coders would be compared. To increase reliability of codings, consensus ratings were made by computing the average of the ratings of the four research assistants. Interrater reliability, based on coding of 10 randomly selected interactions, was computed as intraclass correlations (single measure, random, absolute) between the expert coder and the consensus ratings. Because these reliabilities were adequate, the expert coder coded 17 of the remaining interactions and the four research assistants coded the remaining 18 interactions. Consensus ratings were then computed for the 18 interactions that the research assistants coded and were used in the final data set.

Results

Validity of the experimental manipulation

To assure the manipulation served as a social-evaluative threat, the PANAS subscales were examined. For IP's, data were analyzed using a group (2—HSA, LSA) by interval (2—pre-threat, post-threat) ANOVA, with repeated measures on the second factor. Analysis of positive mood revealed a significant interval effect ($F(1,43) = 12.60$, $p < .001$, partial eta$^2 = .23$), indicating lower positive affect after the manipulation (mean 24.44, SD 8.67) compared to before (mean 27.87, SD 6.89). Analysis of negative mood yielded a significant group by interval interaction ($F(1,43) = 15.40$, $p < .0001$, partial eta$^2 = .26$). Post-hoc Tukey tests, with comparison-specific error terms, indicated that although groups did not differ in negative affect before the manipulation, the HSA group showed higher negative affect afterwards, relative to the LSA group (See Table 3). Comparing pre- and post-threat intervals indicated that both groups showed

Table 3
Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Helpee behavior		.02	−.02	.43*	−.58**	−.41
2. Helper behavior	.38		.42	.24	−.16	.34
3. IP satisfaction	.54**	.10		.35	−.08	−.04
4. RP satisfaction	.60**	.10	.62**		−.35	−.46*
5. IP pre-talk PANAS-N	−.14	−.10	.06	.00		.52*
6. IP post-talk PANAS-N	−.19	−.08	.04	.02	.81**	
M(SD) for HSA group	1.93(.73)	1.23(.79)	6.21(.79)	6.16(.91)	12.45(2.82)	21.05(8.62)
M(SD) for LSA group	2.07(.87)	1.10(.61)	6.22(.69)	5.91(1.15)	12.09(3.04)	14.26(3.60)

Notes: Correlations for the HSA group are above the diagonal; Correlations for the LSA group are below the diagonal. IP = identified participants (female); RP = romantic partner; Helper (RP) and helpee (IP) behavior = composite ratings from the adapted social support interaction coding system; Satisfaction = satisfaction subscale of the perceived relationship quality components inventory (PRQC; Fletcher et al., 2000); PANAS = negative affect subscale of the positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). *N* for HSA group = 22; *N* for LSA group = 23. $*p<.05$; $**p<.01$.

significant increases in negative affect after the manipulation, although the increase reported by the HSA group was significantly greater than that reported by the LSA group. For RPs, the two PANAS subscales were analyzed using paired samples *t*-tests, which did not reveal significant differences. These data indicate that the manipulation was successful in serving as a social-evaluative threat for IPs and created significant distress for those women in the HSA group.

Primary analyses

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables are shown in Table 3.

Hypothesis 1. Do HSA females and their partners behave more negatively than LSA females and their partners?

Independent samples *t*-tests revealed no differences between helpee behavior of HSAs ($M = 1.93$, SD = .73) and LSAs ($M = 2.07$, SD = .87), t (42) = .60, $p = .55$. There also were no differences between helper behavior of people partnered with HSAs ($M = 1.22$, SD = .79) and LSAs ($M = 1.10$, SD = .61), t (42) = −.58, $p = .57$.

Hypothesis 2. Do HSA females and their partners behave more negatively than LSA females and their partners only when they are less satisfied?

Hierarchical linear regressions were conducted predicting behavior from group (HSA (coded as 1) vs. LSA (coded as 0)), relationship satisfaction, and their interaction. Main effects were entered first followed by the interaction. Relationship satisfaction was centered (Aiken & West, 1991). For IPs, we predicted helpee behavior from group, her satisfaction, and their interaction. As shown in Table 4, there was a significant interaction ($\beta = -.47$, $t = -2.22$, $p = .03$), accounting for 10% of variance in helpee behavior. To decompose the interaction, we used simple slopes procedures

Table 4
Hierarchical linear regression analyses examining Hypothesis 2: do socially anxious females and their partners behave more negatively than non-socially anxious females and their partners only when they are less satisfied?

Variable	*B*	*β*	*t*	*p*	R^2 change
DV = Helpee behavior					
1. Group	−.16	−.10	−.66	.51	
IP satisfaction	.30	.28	1.84	.07	.08
2. Group × IP satisfaction	−.70	.32	−2.22	.03	.10
DV = Helper behavior					
1. Group	.10	.08	.50	.62	
RP satisfaction	.11	.16	1.05	.30	.03
2. Group × RP satisfaction	.15	.13	.69	.50	.01

Notes: $N = 43$. IP = identified participants (female); RP = romantic partner; Helper (RP) and helpee (IP) behavior = composite ratings from the adapted social support interaction coding system; Satisfaction = satisfaction subscale of the perceived relationship quality components inventory (PRQC; Fletcher et al., 2000).

(Aiken & West, 1991), in which the analysis is conducted at high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean) and low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean) levels of relationship satisfaction. At high levels of satisfaction, the association between group and behavior was significant ($\beta = -.41$, $t = -2.05$, $p = .05$). Unexpectedly, HSAs exhibited more negative helpee behavior, compared to LSAs. At low levels of satisfaction, the association was not significant ($\beta = -.05$, $t = -.45$, $p = .65$). As a post-hoc explanation of these findings, we speculate that socially anxious females who are satisfied may feel comfortable behaving in a negative manner when they are anxious and preparing to engage in an anxiety-provoking task. Their satisfaction may serve as a signal to them that the relationship is strong enough to withstand their negative behavior.

For RPs, we predicted helper behavior from group, his satisfaction, and their interaction. As shown in Table 4, this analysis yielded a non-significant interaction ($\beta = .13$, $t = .69$, $p = .50$). None of the main effects were significant either (all $ps > .60$).

Hypothesis 3. Does more negative partner behavior lead to increases in negative affect among HSA females following social-evaluative threat?

A hierarchical linear regression was conducted predicting IP's post-interaction negative affect from IP's pre-interaction negative affect (entered first), helper behavior and group (entered second), and the interaction of behavior and group (entered last). The behavior variable was centered. There was a significant interaction ($\beta = .32$, $t = 1.99$, $p = .05$), accounting for 4% of variance in post-interaction negative affect (see Table 5). We then examined the association between helper behavior and changes in negative affect separately among HSAs and LSAs. Among HSAs, the association between helper behavior and changes in negative affect was significant ($\beta = .45$, $t = 2.62$, $p = .02$). Unexpectedly, more positive helper behavior was associated with increases in negative affect. For LSAs, the association was not significant ($\beta = -.00$, $t = -.01$, $p = .99$). The findings are consistent with the prior ones and in line with the idea that positive partner behavior indicates that it is safe to experience and perhaps express negative emotion. To further explore this, we conducted supplementary analyses to examine

Table 5
Hierarchical linear regression analysis examining Hypothesis 3: does more negative partner behavior lead to increases in negative affect (pre- to post-interaction) among socially anxious females following social-evaluative threat?

Variable	*B*	*β*	*t*	*p*	R^2 change
DV = IP post-interaction negative affect					
1. Pre-interaction negative affect	1.33	.53	4.071	.00	.28
2. Helper behavior	2.79	.27	2.53	.02	
Group	6.46	.45	4.27	.00	.29
3. Group × Helper behavior	4.28	.32	1.99	.05	.04

Notes: $N = 43$. IP = identified participants (female); Helper (RP) behavior = composite ratings from the adapted social support interaction coding system; Negative affect = negative affect subscale of the positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988).

whether more positive helper behavior was associated with increases in negative affect only among HSAs in satisfying relationships.

Supplementary analysis. Is more positive partner behavior associated with increases in negative affect among HSA females only for those in satisfying relationships?

Hierarchical linear regressions were conducted predicting HSAs' post-interaction negative affect from their pre-interaction negative affect (entered first), helper behavior and relationship satisfaction (centered and entered second), and the interaction of behavior and satisfaction (entered last). The first analysis examined IP's satisfaction and yielded a non-significant interaction ($\beta = .23$, $t = 1.22$, $p = .24$). Pre-interaction negative affect ($\beta = .69$, $t = 4.10$, $p = .001$) and helper behavior ($\beta = .48$, $t = 2.56$, $p = .02$) were significant, but her satisfaction was not ($\beta = -193$, $t = -.98$, $p = .34$). The second analysis examined RP's satisfaction and yielded a significant interaction ($\beta = .44$, $t = 2.95$, $p = .005$), accounting for 14% of variance in post-interaction negative affect. Simple slopes procedures indicated that at high levels of RP satisfaction, the association between helper behavior and changes in negative affect was significant ($\beta = .78$, $t = 4.86$, $p < .001$). At low levels of RP satisfaction, the association was not significant ($\beta = -.13$, $t = -.51$, $p = .61$). These findings are consistent with our prior speculations and suggest that HSA women may be interpreting partners' behavior in the context of knowledge that he is satisfied in the relationship. If he is satisfied and behaving positively, she may feel safe to experience and possibly express negative affect associated with preparing for an anxiety-provoking task.[4]

[4]Some readers may question whether relationship satisfaction is confounded with relationship duration, which would lead to an alternative explanation for our results. Specifically, that socially anxious women may feel comfortable behaving more negatively and expressing more negativity because they have been with their partner longer. We examined the association between relationship satisfaction and duration among the full sample and among the socially anxious and non-socially anxious groups separately. For the full sample, the correlations were $r = -.14$ (ns) for the females and $r = .03$ (ns) for the males. For the low SA group, the correlations were $r = -.38$ (ns) for the females and $r = -.11$ (ns) for the males. For the high SA group, the correlations were r = .01 (ns) for the females and $r = .12$ (ns) for the males. These data provide no support for the alternative hypothesis, as satisfaction and duration were either not associated or associated negatively.

Discussion

In this preliminary study, we examined how socially anxious women and their romantic partners interacted when faced with a social threat. Given growing evidence that people with SA may show maladaptive interaction patterns with close others (e.g., Bruch et al., 1999; Davila & Beck, 2002; Wenzel et al., 2005), we predicted that socially anxious women and their partners would display more negative behaviors towards one another when stressed, that this effect would be strongest for dissatisfied couples, and that socially anxious women would report more distress when their partners acted more negatively. Unexpectedly, an entirely different pattern of results emerged. First, no differences in support behaviors were found between HSA and LSA women and their partners. Second, although relationship satisfaction influenced this process, it was the more satisfied women who showed more negative behavior. Third, the more their partners exhibited positive support behaviors, the greater was the distress reported by socially anxious women, and this was most true among women whose partners reported higher levels of satisfaction. In sum, whereas we had expected to learn more about dysfunctional patterns of relating in romantic relationships involving socially anxious women, our findings revealed much more about circumstances in which socially anxious women may feel comfortable displaying negative behaviors and reporting distress.

Of course, the findings warrant replication before firm conclusions can be drawn. However, some tentative speculation is in order. It may be that when socially anxious women are involved in satisfying relationships with partners who behave positively, they may feel safe enough to express negative behaviors and feelings openly. Attachment theorists (Bowlby 1969, 1988; Collins & Feeney, 2000) have proposed that when people feel safe in relationships, they are able to use their partners as a secure base; they feel comfortable turning to a partner during times of need, with the expectation that the partner will be available and supportive. For socially anxious women, awareness of being in a satisfying relationship and observance of partners' positive behaviors may be signals of security, which may lead to or reinforce expectations that partners are available. This may then allow socially anxious women to feel comfortable turning to their partner for support in times of need and, in doing so, displaying distress openly.

It is notable that no differences in support behaviors were observed between HSA and LSA women. This contrasts earlier studies in which SA was associated with negative styles of relating to close others (e.g., Davila & Beck, 2002). In considering this discrepancy, it may be that socially anxious people misperceive and hence, misreport their behavior. As reported by Christensen, Stein, and Means-Christensen (2003), socially anxious people believe that others are judging them negatively, a process that is more closely related to their self-perceptions than to the actual opinions of others. This negative self-bias also could influence perceptions of their own behavior. This type of self-perception bias has been discussed by several SA theorists (e.g., Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997) and potentially extends to perceptual biases in close relationships. As such, the perceptions and behaviors of socially anxious women may be quite different, again reinforcing the need to observe actual behavior in close relationships.

Like any research endeavor, this study has some clear limitations. Specifically, we studied a small sample of undergraduate women, which limits generalizability for men and clinical levels of SA (although the HSA sample reported significant elevations in scores on the SPS and the SPAI). As noted earlier, we see this study as preliminary and note the need for replication in larger

samples. However, this preliminary study offers a surprising glimpse at the behavior of women with elevated SA, when interacting with their romantic partner under social-evaluative threat. Although preliminary, the findings highlight how our understanding of the social behavior of people with SA is in its infancy and how greater study of how socially anxious people relate in close relationships is needed to elaborate our conceptual models of SA.

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