Social Anxiety and Receptivity to Interpersonal Evaluation

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Reactions to interpersonal evaluation were investigated among subjects chronically low and high in social anxiety, or shyness. Both groups of subjects expressed more positive affect after receiving favorable than after receiving unfavorable evaluations, supporting a "self-esteem" prediction. However, support for a "self-consistency" viewpoint was also found. In particular, low social anxiety individuals expressed more negative affect (anger) following negative than following positive feedback, while high social anxiety individuals expressed more unpleasant affect (distress) following positive than following negative interpersonal feedback. Additionally, low social anxiety subjects were alone in derogating the accuracy of negative feedback; high social anxiety individuals were indiscriminate in rating the two types of feedback as equally accurate. The role of interpersonal evaluation in the maintenance of social anxiety was discussed briefly.

The question of how individuals respond to interpersonal evaluation has generated considerable theoretical and empirical interest (e.g., Shrauger, 1975). Evidence that individuals prefer information from others in agreement with their own self-evaluations, even if their self-evaluations are negative, has occasionally been reported (e.g., Aronson & Carlsmith, 1962). These findings support what has been termed "self-consistency theory," which states that interpersonal evaluations inconsistent with self-evaluations will tend to be rejected. However, it has also been found that, regardless of self-evaluations, individuals respond more favorably to

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positive than to negative interpersonal evaluations (e.g., Jones, 1973), especially if they are concerned with gaining approval. These findings support a variant of “self-esteem theory” or “self-enhancement theory” (Shrauger, 1975).

Recently, there has been a growing interest in social anxiety, or shyness, and the role it plays in interpersonal relations. For instance, it has been suggested that persons high in social anxiety have a strong concern over social approval and disapproval and therefore plan, adopt, and carry out a different quality of social interaction with others than their low social anxiety brethren (e.g., Arkin, 1981). In particular, socially anxious persons may behave “like a conservative investor” (Zimbardo, 1977) in the social arena, seeking approval where possible but avoiding disapproval at every opportunity. It has also been reported that persons high in social anxiety have a low estimate of their social skills, or interpersonal competence (e.g., Clark & Arkowitz, 1975; Nicholls, 1974; Solomon, 1976; Ziller, 1973), and that this can produce social withdrawal, a “reticence syndrome,” or other social dysfluencies (e.g., Zimbardo, 1977). The negative self-evaluation and approval concerns of high social anxiety individuals made social anxiety a reasonable arena within which to carry out tests of self-esteem and self-consistency theory. It also raises the question of the role interpersonal evaluation may play in the initiation and maintenance of social anxiety.

To provide evidence concerning reactions to interpersonal evaluation, the present investigation included (1) positive and negative interpersonal evaluations and (2) separate indices of positive and negative affect. Inclusion of positive as well as negative interpersonal evaluations permits tests of the self-esteem and self-consistency predictions (through inspection of interactions of social anxiety and valence of evaluation versus main effects of valence). Because positive and negative affects are apparently uncorrelated, but both positive and negative affects are associated with overall happiness (e.g., Bradburn, 1969; Costa & McCrae, 1980), it also seemed crucial to include both indices of responses to interpersonal evaluation. Third, because of the empirical and theoretical distinction between cognitive and affective reactions to interpersonal evaluation (Shrauger, 1975), an additional measure of cognitive reactions was included.

**METHOD**

**Subjects**

Sixteen males scoring high (upper third of the distribution) and 16 males scoring low (lowest third) on the social anxiety subscale of the Self-consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) participated in exchange for extra credit in their introductory psychology course. They were contacted by phone and scheduled to participate by an experimental