Effects of Self-Directed Attention on
Performance and Persistence Among Persons
High and Low in Test Anxiety

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Recent theories of test anxiety hold that self-directed attention impairs
the performances of test-anxious persons in evaluative situations. Re-
searchers have not sought to experimentally validate the mediation of self-
focus in this relationship, however. Two studies are reported that were in-
tended to provide evidence on this point. The studies also integrate the
impairment hypothesis with a broader model of self-regulation, in which
self-focus is sometimes facilitating and sometimes debilitating, depending
upon the person's expectancies of being able to perform adequately. In
Experiment 1, subjects high and low in test anxiety attempted a series of
anagrams in an evaluative situation. As predicted, rather than exerting a
uniformly adverse effect, experimentally enhanced self-focus interacted
with level of test anxiety, improving performances among low-anxious
subjects, impairing them among the test-anxious. Subjects in Experiment

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2 attempted an insoluble test item, while their persistence was unobtrusively monitored. Self-directed attention once again interacted with level of test anxiety, so as to increase persistence among low-anxious subjects and to decrease it among the test-anxious. In neither study was there strong evidence that the difference in responding to self-focus was mediated by expectancy of performing well. A general discussion addresses this issue, along with the following: the relationship between these studies and the earlier literature of test anxiety, the theoretical implications of the fact that self-focus had interactive effects, and the fact that the theoretical model predicting these effects was developed in the context of normal, rather than abnormal, behavior.

The experience of test anxiety creates academic difficulties for many students (e.g., Eysenck & Rachman, 1965; Johnson & Sechrest, 1968). Interest in this phenomenon has grown rapidly in recent years, as witnessed (for example) by the recent publication of two separate volumes of research and theory in the area (Krohne & Laux, 1982; Sarason, 1980). Early theories of test anxiety were based on assumptions concerning the effects of high levels of arousal (e.g., Spence & Spence, 1966). But contemporary approaches have emphasized instead the role played by cognitive variables (e.g., Sarason, 1975, 1978; Sarason & Stoops, 1978; Wine, 1971, 1980, 1982). Indeed, at least two recent studies have found that persons high and low in test anxiety do not differ in the levels of arousal they experience during testing (Hollandsworth, Glazecki, Kirkland, Jones, & Van Norman, 1979; Holroyd, Westbrook, Wolf, & Badhorn, 1978).

Test-anxious persons do not always exhibit performance deficits. They do so only when they feel themselves to be undergoing evaluation on dimensions that are of personal importance (see Wine, 1982). This has led Wine to characterize the experience of test anxiety as a manifestation of a broader "evaluation anxiety." When in highly evaluative circumstances, the test-anxious engage in self-deprecatory rumination (e.g., Meichenbaum, 1972; Mandler & Watson, 1966; Deffenbacher, 1978) and neglect or misinterpret readily available task-relevant cues (e.g., West, Lee, & Anderson, 1969; Geen, 1976). On the basis of such findings, Wine (1971, 1980, 1982) has argued that highly test-anxious persons are likely to become extremely self-focused when placed in an evaluative test setting. Self-attention presumably interferes with their performances by distracting them from focusing on the task. In Wine's view, then, self-focus in a performance setting always is associated with performance impairment.