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Stereotype confirmation concern and fear of negative evaluation among African Americans and Caucasians with Social Anxiety Disorder

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Abstract

Fear of negative evaluation is a central component of social anxiety. The current study examines the relation between fear of negative evaluation and fears of confirming stereotypes about a social group to which one belongs among people diagnosed with social anxiety disorder. Participants ($N = 94$) with a primary diagnosis of social anxiety disorder who self-identified as either African American ($n = 41$) or Caucasian ($n = 53$) completed standardized self-report measures of stereotype confirmation concerns and fear of negative evaluation. Results from hierarchical logistical regression showed that stereotype confirmation concerns predicted fear of negative evaluation for both racial groups, with greater concern predicting greater fear. This association was moderated by race, $B = -.24$, $t = -2.67$, $p < .01$, such that stereotype confirmation concerns had a stronger association with fear of negative evaluation for Caucasians ($b = .38$, $p < .01$) than for African Americans ($b = .14$, $p < .05$). This study is the first to directly examine the relation between stereotypes and fear of negative evaluation within a socially anxious sample. Although we cannot identify the specific social group to which each participant's stereotype confirmation concerns apply, this study provides quantitative evidence that the social context within which socially anxious individuals view themselves impacts their fear of negative evaluation and highlights the need for further research in this area.

Keywords

Social Anxiety; Stereotypes

1. Introduction

The fear of others' critical judgments in social situations is a core feature of social anxiety disorder (Stopa & Clark, 1993). Models of social anxiety propose that when social situations are encountered, individuals with social anxiety perceive others as critical, hold a negatively

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distorted view of themselves, estimate that negative evaluation from others is likely, and exhibit behavioral avoidance (Heimberg, Brozovich, & Rapee, 2010; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Judgment about the social groups to which individuals belong (e.g., groups based on age, gender, race, etc.) may be relevant to individuals' fears of negative evaluation, although this has yet to be tested empirically. The proposed study examines fear of confirming stereotypes as one way in which fears based on social group membership may influence individuals' fear of negative evaluation.

Stereotype confirmation concern is a "chronic experience of uncertainty and apprehension about appearing to confirm as self-characteristic a stereotype about one's group" (Contrada, Ashmore, Gary, Coups, Egeth, Sewell, Ewell, Goyal, & Chasse, 2001, p. 1778). It emerged from the robust literature on stereotype threat - a reduction in task performance when a stereotype about an individual's social group is made salient (Steele, 1997). Stereotype threat has been associated with greater physiological arousal (Blascovich et al., 2001) and more negative thoughts about one's performance (Cadinu, Maas, Rosabianca, & Kiesner, 2005). Whereas stereotype threat is an acute effect activated by situational cues, stereotype confirmation concern is conceptualized to be relatively enduring. The stereotype confirmation concern scale (SCCS) was developed to test this construct. Research using the SCCS has focused on racial groups, although the measure itself does not reference a particular social group (e.g., concerns about confirming stereotypes related to age, gender, race, etc.). Contrada et al. (2001) found that although stereotype confirmation concern was highest among Blacks (relative to Asians, Latinos, and Whites), stereotype confirmation concern was positively correlated with stress and mood for all groups. All research using this measure has been conducted with non-clinical populations. There is little research that examines the effects of stereotypes, or worries about confirming them, among those who experience anxiety psychopathology.

One notable exception is Hunter and Schmidt's (2010) sociocultural model of anxiety psychopathology for Black adults, which specifically accounts for contextual factors, such as stereotypes, that may influence the expression of anxiety disorders. They suggest that for Blacks with social anxiety, fears related to minority status may include fears of being embarrassed or humiliated because of their racial status. Case studies of social anxiety treatment for Blacks support this assertion. Fink, Turner, and Beidel (1996) described the treatment of a Black female physician with social anxiety who experienced great distress in social environments at work, where almost all of her colleagues were white men. Initial exposures were ineffective until the racial composition of her perceived audience and her race-related worries were addressed, at which time treatment became more effective. Similarly, Johnson (2006) presented a case study of a Black female student with social anxiety who felt pressure to perform perfectly in order to counter negative stereotypes about the intelligence of her racial group.

Race, however, is not the only dimension upon which people are stereotyped and it is possible that stereotypes --and fears of confirming them-- may be relevant for social anxiety among racial minority and majority groups. Rapee and Heimberg's (1997) model of social anxiety is suggestive of the ways in which stereotype confirmation concerns could impact social anxiety. An individual with social anxiety who believes that others' endorse negative

stereotypes about her social group, may incorporate stereotypical images within her self-view as seen by others. She may estimate that the likelihood of negative evaluation is high based, in part, on negative stereotypes and fear of acting in a way that will confirm those negative stereotypes. Thus, stereotype confirmation concern could contribute to fear of negative evaluation among those with social anxiety disorder.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relation between stereotype confirmation concern and fear of negative evaluation among individuals with social anxiety disorder who self-identify as either Caucasian or African American. We hypothesize that stereotype confirmation concerns will be positively associated with fear of negative evaluation and that this relation will be moderated by race, specifically that the relation between stereotype confirmation concern and fear of negative evaluation will be stronger among African Americans than among Caucasians. Differences in the average levels of stereotype confirmation concerns will also be examined between racial groups; based on prior research we hypothesize higher levels of stereotype confirmation concerns among African Americans.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample ($N = 94$) included people eligible to participate in a randomized controlled trial comparing Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy (VRE; Anderson, Zimand, Hodges, & Rothbaum, 2005), Exposure Group Therapy (EGT; Hofmann, 2004), and a wait-list control group (see Anderson et al., 2013 for details). Participants were included if they self-identified as “African American” ($n = 41$) or “Caucasian” ($n = 53$), were literate in English, and had a primary diagnosis of social phobia with a predominant fear of public speaking as determined by the Structured Clinical Interview for the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (SCID-IV; First, Gibbon, Spitzer, & Williams, 2002). Participants were excluded if they had a history of seizure disorder, mania, schizophrenia, or other psychoses, as well as prominent current suicidal ideation, or current alcohol or drug abuse or dependence.

Participants were 56 women and 38 men with a mean age of 38.90 ($SD = 11.14$; range = 19 – 69) and with a high level of education (87% reported at least “some” college).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Stereotype confirmation concerns—The stereotype confirmation concerns scale (SCCS; Contrada et al., 2001) is an 11-item measure of participants’ fears that they are confirming a stereotype. Respondents rate how frequently over the past 3 months they have been “concerned that by _____ you might appear to be confirming a stereotype.” Sample behaviors include “talking in a certain way” and “the way you look (your physical performance).” The scale does not specify a particular social group or stereotype(s) to which participants should reference when responding. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert type scale of 1 (never) to 7 (always). Total scores range from 11 to 77, and higher scores represent greater concern. The SCCS demonstrates excellent internal consistency, $\alpha = .91$ (Contrada

et al., 2001). Similar results were found with this sample, $\alpha = .92$ among African Americans and $\alpha = .91$ among Caucasians.

2.2.2. Fear of negative evaluation—The Fear of Negative Evaluation-Brief Form (BFNE; Weeks, Heimberg, Fresco, Hart, Turk, & Schneier, 2005) is a 12-item self-report questionnaire that measures the extent to which an individual worries about social judgment. Questions are answered on a 5-point Likert type scale (1 = not at all to 5 = extremely). Total scores range from 12 to 60, and higher scores represent greater fear. Sample items are: “I am unconcerned even if I know people are forming an unfavorable impression of me,” and “The opinions that important people have of me cause me little concern.” The FNE-B demonstrates strong internal consistency, $\alpha = .94$ (Weeks et al., 2005). With this sample, it also has strong internal consistency, $\alpha = .80$ among African Americans and $\alpha = .94$ among Caucasians.

2.2.3. Social anxiety disorder diagnosis—The structured clinical interview for the diagnostic and statistic manual of mental disorders, fourth edition (SCID-I; First et al., 2002) is a semi-structured interview for assessing DSM-IV Axis I diagnoses. The SCID has excellent inter-rater reliability when used to assess SAD with an agreement of 92% and a test-retest reliability of .84 (Crippa, De Lima Osorio, Del-Ben, Filho, Freitas, & Loureiro, 2008).

2.3. Procedure

Participants' eligibility was assessed in a two-part process including a brief telephone screen and in-person assessment during which a doctoral candidate administered the SCID, and participants completed self-report measures. Four doctoral candidates in clinical psychology conducted all assessments. A clinical psychologist with extensive experience as an assessor within clinical research trained the interviewers. Training procedures included watching SCID training tapes, watching SCID interviews by a senior psychologist, and doing a mock SCID interview. The interviewers were rated by an independent assessor and also received weekly assessment supervision with the primary investigator to prevent rater drift. Interrater reliability was calculated for a random sample of ($n = 10$) interviews. There was 100% agreement on the primary diagnosis and one disagreement on symptom severity.

3. Results

Fear of negative evaluation ($M = 31.72$, $SD = 7.72$) was positively correlated with stereotype confirmation concerns ($M = 30.21$, $SD = 15.63$), $r = .47$, $p < .01$. All of the variables were normally distributed, with low skew and kurtosis, and all assumptions of regression were met.

As predicted, participants identifying as African American reported higher levels of stereotype confirmation concern than Caucasians ($M = 33.81$, $SD = 16.89$; $M = 27.25$, $SD = 14.00$, respectively), $t = 2.05$, $p < .05$. There were no differences in fear of negative evaluation between groups for African Americans and Caucasians ($M = 31.38$, $SD = 6.71$ and $M = 32.00$, $SD = 8.52$, respectively), $t = -0.38$, $p = .09$.

Because demographic differences between African Americans and Caucasians could influence group differences in the relation between stereotype confirmation concerns and fear of negative evaluation, we conducted a series of Chi-Square analyses and t-tests for gender, age, marital status, education, and income. There were no differences between African Americans and Caucasians in gender, $\chi^2(1) = 3.80$, $p = .061$, or in average age, $t(91) = .36$, $p = .72$. There was a significant difference in marital status, $\chi^2(5) = 27.31$, $p < .01$, in education level, $\chi^2(6) = 14.60$, $p = .024$, and in income, $\chi^2(5) = 20.21$, $p = .001$, with Caucasians reporting a greater likelihood of being married or living with someone, higher levels of educational achievement, and greater annual income than African Americans.

Variables on which African Americans and Caucasians differed (marital status, education, and income) were entered as covariates in the regression model testing the study hypothesis. None of the variables were significant predictors of fear of negative evaluation, $R^2 = -.01$, $F(3, 91) = 0.55$, $p = .648$; marital status, $b = -0.02$, $p = .853$; education, $b = -0.03$, $p = .784$; income, $b = .14$, $p = .214$ when entered as a first step, nor at any other step of the model used to test the hypothesis. Because the demographic variables were not significant predictors of the dependent variable and because their addition did not change the pattern results, we do not include them in the results presented below, in which we test our primary hypothesis that stereotype confirmation concerns will be a predictor of fear of negative evaluation and that the association will be moderated by race such that the relation will be stronger for African Americans than for Caucasians.

To test the hypothesis that race moderates the relation between stereotype confirmation concerns and fear of negative evaluation, scores on the SCCS were centered and a product term was created by multiplying the centered stereotype confirmation concerns composite variable with race. A hierarchical multiple regression was used to predict participants' fear of negative evaluation following the procedures of Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003). The centered stereotype confirmation concern score was entered as the first step, race was entered as the second step, and the product of the two was entered in the third step. The Durbin-Watson test showed that serial dependency was low, Durbin-Watson = 1.98. Tolerance values were well above .10, ranging from .44–1.00 and VIF values were well below 10, ranging from 1.00–2.27. Therefore, multicollinearity does not appear to be an issue.

The final model explained 27.9% of the variance in participants' fear of negative evaluation, $R^2 = .28$, $F(3, 92) = 12.84$, $p < .01$. As shown in Table 1, in addition to a main effect for stereotype confirmation concerns, $B = .38$, $t = 5.74$, $p < .01$, the interaction between stereotype confirmation concern and race was a significant predictor of fear of negative evaluation, $B = -.24$, $t = -2.67$, $p < .01$, and its addition in step three led to a significant increase in the model's predictive power, R^2 change = .06, $F(1, 98) = 7.15$, $p < .01$. In order to probe the interaction, race was reverse coded and the regression was rerun. As shown in Figure 1, and contrary to our hypothesis, stereotype confirmation concerns had a stronger association with fear of negative evaluation for Caucasians ($b = .38$, $p < .01$) than for African Americans ($b = .14$, $p < .05$). Although African Americans reported higher levels of stereotype confirmation concerns than Caucasians, the relation between stereotype

confirmation concerns and fear of negative evaluation was stronger for Caucasians than for African Americans.

4. Discussion

This study is the first to show that stereotype confirmation concerns, which have been found to be associated with negative outcomes in non-clinical populations (Contrada et al., 2001), also are predictive of symptoms within a clinical population. Concerns about confirming a negative stereotype regarding a social group(s) to which one belongs had a significant positive relation with fear of negative evaluation among both African Americans and Caucasians with social anxiety disorder. This finding can be interpreted within Rapee and Heimberg's (1997) model of social anxiety. For example, people with social anxiety who also have high stereotype confirmation concerns may view the audience's perception of them as stereotypical. As a result, their mental images of themselves as seen by the audience may include stereotypical characteristics and they may expect that their performance would have to be of the highest quality to contradict those stereotypes. They may also fear acting in a way that will confirm those negative stereotypes because it may lead to their rejection. No empirical literature has directly tested these ideas; this is an area for future research.

Consistent with Contrada et al. (2001) and our hypothesis, socially anxious Blacks reported higher levels of stereotype confirmation concerns than Whites. Unexpectedly, the relation between stereotype confirmation concern and fear of negative evaluation was stronger for Whites than for Blacks. The protective effects of racial socialization, racial identity, and coping with race-related stress for Blacks (Bynum, Burton, & Best, 2007; Neblett, Shelton, & Sellers, 2004; Plummer & Slane, 1996) may attenuate the relation between stereotype confirmation concerns and fear of negative evaluation for Blacks. This also is an area for future research.

Results suggest that stereotype confirmation concerns should be considered as a possible source of fear of negative evaluation among people with social anxiety disorder. When devising exposure exercises for those with social anxiety, it may be useful to include situations that induce stereotype confirmation concerns. Clinicians could query socially anxious clients about their social identities and whether stereotype confirmation concerns are activated in feared social situations. Such lines of inquiry allows for further consideration of the influence of the client's social identities on feared social situations and is in keeping with culturally competent practice (Anderson, Lewis, Johnson, Morgan, & Street, in press). A review of case studies for social anxiety disorder suggests that the impact of social identity and stereotypes is most likely to be considered for racial minority women (Fink, Turner, & Beidel, 1996; Johnson, 2006). The findings of the present study suggest that we should assess this for minority and majority group members.

A major limitation of this study is that the measure of stereotype confirmation concerns allows the respondents to answer based on any stereotype of a group with which they self-identify (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation). Thus, we cannot make assertions about the nature of the stereotypes about which participants were thinking when answering the self-report measure. Furthermore, given the intersectionality of social identities, respondents

might also refer to multiple social identities when answering items (Cole, 2009). It is worth noting that both case studies examining the influence of stereotypes did so among African American women (Fink, Turner, and Beidel, 1996; Johnson, 2006). Future research on stereotype confirmation concerns and social anxiety disorder would benefit from detailed assessment of the nature of the stereotypes that participants fear they will reinforce, which could include more than one social identity. Future research should also directly evaluate whether explicitly targeting stereotype confirmation concerns during exposure, or other aspects of therapy, reduces fear of negative evaluation and other symptoms of social anxiety.

Another limitation is that our sample is composed of only those who self-identified as Caucasian and African American. Stereotype confirmation concerns are likely applicable to members of other races (and social groups) and differences in the levels of stereotype confirmation concerns across groups may shift over time (e.g., stereotype confirmation concerns may be higher for those of Middle Eastern descent in the post 9/11 world). Future research on stereotype confirmation concerns would benefit from a diverse sample of social groups that would provide a broader view of group differences and the differential impact of fears of confirming stereotypes.

4.1. Conclusions

This study is one of few to directly examine the impact of social identities on the experience of social anxiety. It provides quantitative evidence that the social context within which socially anxious individuals view themselves impacts their fear of negative evaluation. For both Blacks and Whites with social anxiety disorder, fear of negative evaluation was predicted by stereotype confirmation concerns - a construct that captures one aspect of social interaction in a socially heterogeneous world. Research should continue to examine how stereotypes and other aspects of social group experience impact social anxiety and its treatment.

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Highlights

- Stereotype confirmation concerns predicted fear of negative evaluation among those diagnosed with social anxiety disorder, with greater concern predicting greater fear.
- Race moderated the relation between stereotype confirmation concern and fear of negative evaluation.
- The relation between stereotype confirmation concerns and fear of negative evaluation was stronger for Caucasians ($b = .380, p < .01$) than for African Americans ($b = .140, p < .05$).

Figure 1.

The effect of stereotype confirmation concerns on fear of negative evaluation moderated by minority status. The slopes for majority and minority status groups are both significant; however, stereotype confirmation has a stronger effect on fear of negative evaluation for the majority group.

Table 1

Hierarchical Regression: Race as a Moderator of Stereotype Confirmation Concerns Predicting Fear of Negative Evaluation

	B	SE	t	Model R²
Step 1				.217*
Stereotype Confirmation Concerns	.234	.046	5.147*	
Step 2				.229*
Stereotype Confirmation Concerns	.250	.046	5.401*	
Race	−2.259	1.444	−1.564	
Step 3				.279*
Stereotype Confirmation Concerns	.380	.066	5.742*	
Race	−2.127	1.398	−1.521	
SCCS X Race	−.240	.090	−2.674*	

Note.

* $p < .01$.