Are You Sure? The Interactive Effects of Fears of Negative and Positive Evaluation on Excessive Reassurance Seeking

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Abstract
Excessive reassurance seeking (ERS) is a maladaptive emotion regulation strategy wherein people excessively ask others about their worth to reduce anxiety. Recent research has shown that fear of negative evaluation (FNE)—a central component of social anxiety—is an important factor contributing to ERS. Another prominent characteristic of social anxiety is fear of positive evaluation (FPE). However, no research to date has examined whether FPE is an important factor in ERS. Thus, the goal of the study was to investigate the interactive effects of fears of negative and positive evaluation on ERS. One hundred fifty undergraduate students completed online questionnaires assessing FNE, FPE, reassurance seeking and depressive symptoms. We used two reassurance seeking scales: the Depressive Interpersonal Relationships Inventory—Reassurance-Seeking subscale (DIRI-RS) and the Threat-related Reassurance Seeking Scale, which contains two subscales related to general (TRSS-GEN) and evaluative (TRSS-EVA) threats. We conducted moderation analyses for each reassurance seeking outcome variable. The DIRI-RS analyses showed that higher FNE and FPE significantly predicted ERS above and beyond depressive symptoms. Furthermore, an interaction emerged such that individuals with high fear of negative evaluation tended to seek more reassurance, regardless of their level of fear of positive evaluation, but that individuals low in FNE sought more reassurance only if they had high FPE. The TRSS-GEN showed a similar pattern to the DIRI-RS; however, FPE did not predict reassurance seeking significantly in this model. Conversely, only FNE predicted reassurance seeking for the TRSS-EVA. Overall, these preliminary results suggest that FNE is important across different types of reassurance seeking, whereas people’s level of FPE is particularly important in determining how much they seek general threat-related reassurance from others.

Introduction
- Excessive reassurance seeking (ERS) o Asking others excessively about own worth to reduce anxiety o Related to social anxiety (Cougil et al., 2012) and depression (McClintock, McCarrick, & Anderson, 2014)
- Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) o Fear of being negatively evaluated by others o Central component of social anxiety o Predicts ERS above and beyond depressive symptoms (McClintock et al., 2014)
- Fear of positive evaluation (FPE) o Fear of being favorably evaluated by others o Related to but distinct from FNE (Rodebaugh, Weeks, Gordon, Langer, & Heimberg, 2012) o Related to ERS? o Does FPE influence the relationship between FNE and ERS?
- Hypotheses o FPE will moderate the relationship between FNE and ERS o FNE will predict greater ERS only if FPE is low

Methods
Participants • 151 undergraduate students (90.1% female, M_age = 18.91, SD = 2.41)
Measures • Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale—Straightforward Items (BFNES-S; Weeks et al., 2005)
• Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale (FPES; Weeks, Heimberg, & Rodebaugh, 2008)
• Depressive Interpersonal Relationships Inventory—Reassurance-Seeking subscale (DIRI-RS; Joiner & Metalsky, 2001)
• Threat-related Reassurance Seeking Scale (TRSS; Cough et al., 2012)
  o General Threat subscale (TRSS-GEN)
  o Evaluation Threat subscale (TRSS-EVA)
• Depression Anxiety Stress Scales—Depression subscale (DASS-DEP; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995)
Procedure • All questionnaires completed online (randomized order)
Analyses • Four separate moderation analyses (PROCESS macro for SPSS; Hayes, 2013)
  o Independent variable: BFNES-S
  o Moderating variable: FPES
  o Outcome variables: DIRI-RS / TRSS-GEN / TRSS-EVA
  o Covariate: DASS-DEP

Results
Table 1. Intercorrelations Among and Descriptive Statistics for Measures of Interest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>BFNES-S</th>
<th>F NES</th>
<th>DIRI-RS</th>
<th>TRSS-GEN</th>
<th>TRSS-EVA</th>
<th>DASS-DEP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BFNES-S</td>
<td>18.32</td>
<td>8.65</td>
<td>- .512 *</td>
<td>.430 **</td>
<td>.350 *</td>
<td>.439 **</td>
<td>.386 **</td>
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<tr>
<td>FPES</td>
<td>36.77</td>
<td>15.61</td>
<td>- .384 *</td>
<td>.260 **</td>
<td>.271 **</td>
<td>.355 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIRI-RS</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- .595 *</td>
<td>.667 *</td>
<td>.287 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRSS-GEN</td>
<td>13.62</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>.711 **</td>
<td>.247 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRSS-EVA</td>
<td>12.87</td>
<td>6.47</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.257 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DASS-DEP</td>
<td>10.06</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note for all results: *p < .05, **p < .01 and *p < .001

Table 2. Model Summaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>R² increase due to interaction</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DIRI-RS</td>
<td>.503</td>
<td>.253</td>
<td>12.350</td>
<td>&lt; .001 *</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.038 *</td>
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<tr>
<td>TRSS-GEN</td>
<td>.418</td>
<td>.175</td>
<td>7.729</td>
<td>&lt; .001 *</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.018 *</td>
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<tr>
<td>TRSS-EVA</td>
<td>.454</td>
<td>.206</td>
<td>9.463</td>
<td>&lt; .001 *</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.480</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion
- High fear of negative evaluation (FNE) contributes to ERS
- High fear of positive evaluation (FPE) may contribute to ERS, especially if FNE is low
- FNE and FPE may be differentially linked to different types of ERS
- Effects are not due to depressive symptoms, highlighting relevance of ERS in cognitive-behavioural models of social anxiety
- Current ERS questionnaires may not tap impact of FPE, which typically arises in public or with figures of authority
- Future research assessing impact of FPE and FNE on various types of ERS in social anxiety is warranted (especially using clinical samples)
- Cognitive-behavioural therapies focusing on fear of positive and negative evaluation may help reduce ERS and social anxiety

References

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