Fear of positive evaluation and the bivalent fear of evaluation model of social anxiety: An Integration

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ABSTRACT

Humans have an inherent need to belong to a social group, and ostracism can lead to significant personal costs. Therefore, the fear of negative evaluation by others, along with its associated consequence of social anxiety, appears to be evolutionarily adaptive. Numerous studies have demonstrated that social anxiety, as well as its clinical manifestation, social anxiety disorder (SAD), is not only linked to an intense fear of negative evaluation but also to a fear of positive evaluation. This phenomenon has been termed the Bivalent Fear of Evaluation (BFOE) model of social anxiety. While the fear of negative evaluation can be understood from an evolutionary standpoint, the fear of positive evaluation poses a challenge for such an account. Clarifying the relationship between these two fears—positive and negative evaluation—may provide new insights into the nature of social anxiety and SAD. After summarizing and reviewing studies comprising this special issue, I will conclude that any form of evaluative feedback rising self-focused attention—whether positive, negative, or even neutral—can cause distress due to heightened sensitivity to social feedback in general. However, different mechanisms and contextual factors are implicated. In line with cognitive models of SAD, the self and self-perception are central to both social anxiety and SAD. This has significant theoretical and clinical implications.

1. Introduction

Our society and culture are structured by social norms and social hierarchies. Deviating from these norms can result in severe repercussions, such as imprisonment, which essentially entails social isolation as a form of punishment. Consequently, it seems evident that the fear of social exclusion or isolation can trigger social anxiety. Situations that put individuals into the spotlight and subject them to public scrutiny, such as interactions or performances in front of others, are common triggers for social anxiety.

Given that we are constantly surrounded by others, frequently find ourselves in the limelight, and are often required to perform in front of an audience in our daily lives, it is not surprising that social anxiety is a prevalent human experience. Social anxiety serves the purpose of ensuring conformity to social norms and group expectations, as humans are inherently social beings reliant on social support for emotional well-being. The evolutionary perspective suggests that social anxiety and the fear of negative evaluation by others are adaptive mechanisms that enhance an individual's chances of survival within a group. However, an excessive fear of negative evaluation in modern society can lead to maladaptive behaviors, culminating in social anxiety disorder when it reaches a critical threshold of distress and interference with daily functioning.

But is this really the end of the story? Is social anxiety simply the result of maladaptive fear of negative evaluation by others? This special issue examines in detail this basic premise and offers a critical fresh new look at an old phenomenon. More specifically, the editors of this series put the focus on one important detail with significant theoretical and practical implications. This detail has to do with the valence of the evaluation and the idea has been referred to as the Bivalent Fear of Evaluation (BFOE) model of social anxiety. Before delving into the findings of the articles I will set the stage by revisiting the evolutionary account of social anxiety.

2. An evolutionary perspective on social anxiety

Arguably, the survival of our species depended and still depends on the structure of our social groups. Through an evolutionary lens, the presence of social support is highly adaptive and being socially isolated is highly maladaptive. Humans are most successful when operating in groups. Therefore, the fear of negative evaluation is adaptive and desirable when experienced in contexts warranting such feelings. Consequently, evolutionary forces drive humans toward social collaboration.

The survival prospects of groups far surpass those of single individuals lacking societal backing. Groups empower humans to

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overcome formidable obstacles and distribute tasks efficiently. For example, in ancient hunter-gatherer societies, some members were tasked with nurturing children, whereas others supplied food and shelter. Analogously, a pack of wolves demonstrates superior hunting prowess compared to a lone wolf. Groups provide the essential framework for the formation of meta-organisms, such as bee colonies, bird flocks, fish schools, and human tribes and cultural collectives.

In essence, group membership emerges as a critical evolutionary imperative for survival. Exclusion from one's peer group diminishes survival prospects, rendering individuals vulnerable to predation and lacking assistance in constructing shelters and gathering resources and food. Negative evaluation by others can signal social exclusion, which can have disastrous consequences for the survival or well-being of the individual. This phenomenon, identified by social psychologists as the "need to belong" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), underscores the intrinsic human drive for social inclusion and cooperation.

An evolutionary approach suggests that individuals experiencing social anxiety tend to amplify the competitive elements of interpersonal relationships while downplaying the cooperative and supportive aspects (Trower & Gilbert, 1989). Trower and Gilbert (1989) propose that social anxiety may have evolved to enhance the functioning of complex social groups, thereby increasing the chances of survival for each member and the human species as a whole. According to this theory, the ability to acquire resources, gather food, occupy personal space, attract mates, etc. is linked to one's relative position in the social hierarchy. Consequently, group members engage in competition for higher status within the hierarchy or strive to maintain their current position. This could lead to ongoing and intense conflicts among group members, posing a threat to the group's survival unless a regulatory mechanism is in place to counteract this tendency.

Social anxiety towards dominant group members and the submissive signaling by subordinate members serve as such a regulatory system, preventing or limiting conflicts within the group. As a result, social anxiety appears to be adaptive for the species as a whole, by supporting the survival of the group. However, what may have been advantageous during early human evolution may not hold true in contemporary society. The function of a trait, even if it once existed, could have evolved over millennia. Nonetheless, it is plausible that social anxiety once played a crucial role in evolutionary survival, potentially by prompting submissive behaviors in subordinates and inhibiting aggression from dominants, allowing subordinates to remain within the social group and in close proximity to dominants. Thus, social anxiety could be viewed as an expression of self-preservation. Some studies have supported Trower and Gilbert's model, indicating that individuals with social anxiety disorder perceive social threats as challenges to social bonds and their position in the social hierarchy (Gilboa-Schechtman, Shachar, & Helpman, 2014; Johnson et al. 2021). Such an evolutionary approach may explain the fear of negative evaluation by others for the reasons described above, but the fear of positive evaluation presents a challenge for an evolutionary account. If social anxiety is caused by a possible demotion in the social hierarchy, then negative evaluation by others should, but positive evaluation should not, cause social anxiety, because positive evaluation signals a promotion, rather than a demotion of one's standing in the social hierarchy.

This is the point where we need to re-think our basic assumptions about the universality of social anxiety across all species. Humans are different from non-human animals in their ability to experience self-consciousness in form and distinguish the self from non-self. As a result, social anxiety in humans is a complex experience and SAD is a heterogeneous disorder. Many factors contribute to this experience and the condition, and what is true for one individual may not apply to another person. I will argue that for those individuals who fear positive evaluation by others, the mechanism that drives social anxiety cannot be easily explained by evolutionary factors that are common among humans and animals (but readers are referred, e.g., to Gilbert [2014] for a psycho-evolutionary model which does account for FPE). Instead, I

argue that negative self-related processes are at the core of social anxiety rather than the fear of negative evaluation by others per se. Before I elaborate on this point, I will summarize and discuss the studies of the special issue to extract the relevant evidence.

3. Review and Integration

This special issue provides a rich set of studies that allows for a more in-depth discussion on the nature of social anxiety, its association to the fear of negative evaluation. I will briefly summarize the studies and highlight and discuss the specific findings that shed new light on these issues, in particular as they speak to the clinical and theoretical relevance.

McEvoy, Black, Piesse, Strachan, and Clarke (2025) conducted an experiment utilizing false feedback manipulation. Following a speech task, participants with varying levels of social anxiety were exposed to false positive or negative feedback, as opposed to receiving no feedback. The study aimed to explore the effects of this manipulation on state anxiety and repetitive negative thinking. Results indicated that individuals with high levels of social anxiety reported elevated levels of state anxiety and repetitive negative thinking compared to those with low social anxiety. Interestingly, there were no significant interactions between feedback type and participant group, suggesting that individuals with high social anxiety exhibited heightened levels of social anxiety and repetitive negative thinking regardless of the feedback they received. This finding aligns with the hypothesis that the discomfort experienced by individuals with high social anxiety is primarily driven by their sensitivity to self-focused attention, irrespective of its positive or negative nature. In other words, it might be the sensitivity toward self-focused attention (regardless of its valence) that drives social anxiety.

But this is not to imply that positive evaluation leads to social anxiety through the same mechanism as negative feedback. Olino, Birk, Case, and Weeks (2025) conducted a study focusing on the factor structure of negative and positive evaluation in youth. The researchers discovered that the two-factor structure involving fear of negative evaluation and fear of positive evaluation only marginally fit the data. Through exploratory models, three specific items were identified with significant cross-loadings. The study revealed that fear of negative evaluation was linked to internalizing problems reported by both youth and their mothers, while fear of positive evaluation was associated with internalizing problems reported by youth, not their parents. Furthermore, the study found that the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and clinical outcomes was stronger compared to fear of positive evaluation. These results suggest that while both types of evaluation fears play a role in SAD, fear of negative evaluation is not merely the inverse or equivalent of fear of positive evaluation. Different underlying mechanisms seem to drive these distinct effects.

The study conducted by Shin and Rodebaugh (2025) aimed to investigate the influence of fear of negative evaluation and fear of positive evaluation on individuals' judgments regarding group characteristics related to warmth and dominance. Additionally, the study explored the potential impact of racial similarity and ethnic identity on the evaluative processes of individuals. To achieve this, the researchers developed vignettes depicting groups varying in warmth and dominance, along with photos displaying different racial compositions. These stimuli were presented to participants, who were then asked to rate their inclination to engage with the groups portrayed in the photo-vignette pairs. The results showed that participants expressed a stronger desire to interact with groups perceived as relatively warmer and less dominant. Interestingly, individuals with heightened fear of negative evaluation exhibited a greater preference for interacting with warmer groups, while those with elevated fear of positive evaluation showed a preference for less dominant groups. This finding suggests that additional contextual factors play a role in shaping individuals' evaluations, whether positive or negative, by their peers. Contrary to the initial

hypothesis, the results did not support the notion that individuals with a stronger ethnic identity would display a heightened desire to engage with groups sharing greater racial similarity.

Azoulay and Gilboa-Schechtman (2025) conducted a study investigating the influence of status positions on fear of negative evaluation, fear of positive evaluation, and social anxiety through a novel manipulation termed CyberStatus. Participants initially provided self-descriptive statements and were then randomly assigned to high, intermediate, or low-status conditions. Subsequently, they reported their emotions, status perceptions, and belongingness-related thoughts, adjusting their self-presentation accordingly. The study revealed that fear of positive evaluation was more strongly associated with self-presentation adjustments in high-status conditions compared to intermediate-status conditions, and was positively correlated with perceived status in low-status conditions versus intermediate-status conditions. Additionally, fear of positive evaluation and social anxiety exhibited stronger connections to belongingness in low-status conditions compared to intermediate-status conditions, whereas fear of negative evaluation displayed the opposite trend. Again, this result points to differences in contextual factors associated with fear of positive vs. negative evaluation.

The study by Racz, Qasmieh, and Reyes (2025) aimed at determining the factor structure of safety behaviors and investigating their distinct relationships with fear of negative evaluation and fear of positive evaluation. The authors pursued these objectives across diverse samples characterized by differences in developmental stage, informant source, and assessment method. Data was gathered through self-reports from college students and adolescent-parent pairs, with parents also engaging in an ecologically-valid evaluation task. The study confirmed a two-factor model of safety behaviors (specifically avoidance and impression management) that exhibited good fit across college students, adolescents, and parents' self-reports, but not in parents' reports regarding adolescents. Significant associations were observed between avoidance, impression management, and fear of negative evaluation/fear of positive evaluation within the same informant group, but not across different informant groups. Additionally, for parents, immediate arousal following negative feedback, but not positive feedback, was linked to both avoidance and impression management behaviors. The results of this study underscore the importance of safety behaviors related to both fear of positive and negative evaluation.

Morrison, Goldin, and Gross (2025) examined the role of fear of negative and positive evaluation as mediators and moderators in CBT vs. mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) using data from a waitlist-controlled trial. Results showed that participants reported less fear of negative and positive evaluation after CBT and MBSR as compared to waitlist. CBT was more efficacious in reducing fear of positive evaluation than MBSR. For both CBT (vs. waitlist) and MBSR (vs. waitlist), the authors observed significant indirect effects on post-treatment social anxiety through both fear of positive and fear of negative evaluation. The indirect effect through fear of positive evaluation was greater for CBT than MBSR, but the fully longitudinal models were not differentially mediated by fear of positive evaluation for CBT and MBSR. Baseline fear of positive and negative evaluation each moderated CBT treatment outcome compared to waitlist, with higher levels being associated with higher baseline social anxiety and greater reductions in social anxiety during CBT. Fear of positive and negative evaluation both contributed to the mediation and moderation of treatment change, but in different ways. These results support the distinction between fears of positive and negative evaluation in the assessment and treatment of SAD.

Weeks et al. (2025) constructed the bivalent fear of evaluation scale (BFOES). Evidence suggests that the two predominant and psychometrically validated instruments for fear of negative and positive evaluation have items with unclear evaluative fear valence. To methodically tackle this issue, this new scale was crafted by fusing items from both fear of negative and positive evaluation measures into one scale with a unified response format. The authors analyzed the psychometric attributes of the BFOES within a combined archival dataset, comprising approximately 10 % of patients with SAD. The study evaluated the factorial validity, internal consistency, and construct validity of the BFOES. Furthermore, item response theory analyses were utilized to merge items from self-report scales with varying Likert-type response formats. Findings from both studies supported the psychometric properties of the BFOES.

The study conducted by Cook, Bryant, and Phillips (2025) outlined the creation and validation of a scale for assessing core beliefs specifically linked to fear of positive evaluation. An exploratory factor analysis was carried out on initial items using an Australian undergraduate cohort, followed by a confirmatory factor analysis with a separate Australian general population sample. Subsequent analyses were conducted to assess convergent and divergent validity. The Positive Evaluation Core Beliefs Scale (PECS) was developed as a 17-item, two-factor, psychometrically sound instrument that shows stronger correlations with fear of positive evaluation than with fear of negative evaluation. The PECS offers a novel tool for researchers and clinicians to investigate cognitions related to social anxiety.

Lange, Howell, and Weeks (2025) introduced the Dutch translation of the BFOE, a freely available yet unvalidated Dutch variant of the FPES. The Dutch FPES demonstrated outstanding convergent and discriminant validity. Additionally, it accounted for more variance in social anxiety than fear of negative evaluation. These findings, along with factor analysis outcomes, closely matched those from assessments of the original English version. In summary, the Dutch FPES exhibited excellent psychometric characteristics and is suitable for further examining the consistency or variation in the BFOE model across different cultures.

Reichenberger, Arend, and Blechert (2025) investigated daily stress using ecological momentary assessment (EMA) of stress and depression. The authors conducted three studies with healthy individuals and patients with SAD, exploring whether reactivity to various daily stressors and momentary stress/emotions assessed via EMA depends on individuals' fear of positive and negative evaluation levels. Nearly all associations with fear of positive and negative evaluation were explained by depressive symptoms, except for a distinct link between fear of negative evaluation and stressor reactivity from the distant social network. Connections between fear of negative evaluation and momentary global stress/emotions were mixed, yet also accounted for by depressive symptoms. Higher depressive symptoms correlated with increased stress, negative affect, and most stressor types, alongside reduced positive affect in all studies. These findings indicate that fear of negative evaluation explains reactivity to social stressors from the distant social network. They also highlight the impact of depressive affect on reactivity to diverse everyday stressors and question the necessity for specific instruments assessing fear of positive and negative evaluation unless stressors are explicitly social-evaluative.

Finally, the study by Rassaby, Spaulding, and Taylor (2025) explored the associations between fear of positive evaluation and responses to a standardized social affiliation task aimed at fostering positive social connection with an unfamiliar conversation partner (trained confederate). The sample encompassed individuals with SAD, major depressive disorder (MDD), comorbid SAD and MDD, and non-psychiatric controls. Participants completed assessments of fear of positive evaluation, affect, safety behaviors, and desire for future interaction. Confederates and observers rated participants' behaviors and their own desire for future engagement. Fear of positive evaluation was most pronounced in the SAD and comorbid groups, followed by the MDD group, and least in the non-psychiatric controls. In the overall sample, fear of positive evaluation correlated with heightened self-reported anxiety and safety behaviors, reduced self-reported positive affect and desire for future interaction, diminished observer-rated desire for future interaction and approach behaviors, and increased observer-rated anxious behaviors. Within-group correlations showed weaker associations in the SAD-only

and comorbid groups compared to the control and MDD-only groups; however, post-hoc moderation analyses suggested that the links between fear of positive evaluation and the outcomes remained consistent across varying levels of social anxiety and depression severity. These results highlight the potential role of fear of positive evaluation as a transdiagnostic factor for understanding interpersonal functioning in social anxiety and depression.

4. Discussion

This series of excellent studies provides some new insights into the complex relationships between fears of positive and negative evaluation and social anxiety, and raises questions for future research. Given the complex nature of the self, SAD is a complex disorder. But, despite its complex nature, SAD can be treated effectively with relatively simple cognitive behavioral strategies. These approaches place a clear emphasis on feared social consequences for oneself. For example, the model by Clark and Wells (1995) assumes that individuals with SAD believe that (1) they may behave in an inept and unacceptable fashion, and (2) that such behavior would have disastrous consequences in terms of loss of status, loss of worth, and rejection. Consistent with this model are the results from studies showing that socially anxious individuals believe that negative social events are more likely to occur than positive social events (Lucock and Salkovskis, 1988). Moreover, individuals with SAD assume that most people are inherently critical of others and are likely to evaluate them negatively (Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014), are typically preoccupied with negative self-evaluative thoughts during feared social situations (Stopa & Clark, 1993), and show a decrease in self-focused attention (Hofmann, 2000a, 2000b; Wells and Papageorgiou, 1998; Woody, Chambless, & Glass, 1997) and less negative self-perception (Hofmann, Moscovitch, Kim, & Taylor, 2004) after effective psychosocial treatment.

Similarly, my own model (Hofmann, 2007; Hofmann and Otto, 2018) assumes that social apprehension is associated with unrealistic social standards and a deficiency in selecting attainable social goals. When faced with difficult social situations, individuals with SAD focus their attention on their anxiety, perceive themselves negatively as social entities, overestimate the potential negative outcomes of an interaction, feel they have limited control over their emotional responses, and believe their social skills are insufficient to handle the situation effectively. To prevent social mishaps, individuals with SAD tend to rely on maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as avoidance and safety behaviors, followed by post-event rumination, which increases future social apprehension. This cycle reinforces itself, leading to the persistence and worsening of the issue. A useful approach to address these fears of negative evaluation from others is to encourage individuals to engage in behaviors that challenge their personal social norms. These exercises, termed social mishap exposure, intentionally create real social mistakes to encourage the person to reassess the consequences. According to this model, therapeutic mediation occurs by changing patients' mental representation of the self in a more positive direction (see also Rapee and Heimberg, 1997), and by changing their beliefs that behaving in an inept and unacceptable fashion in a social situation will have disastrous consequences in terms of loss of status, loss of worth, and rejection (Clark and Wells, 1995).

Similarly, Foa and Kozak's (1986) model proposes that treatment changes are facilitated by a reduction in the exaggerated probabilities and costs linked to feared outcomes. The model further suggests that when an individual's fear structure is fully activated, exposure without negative consequences can alter the inflated harm estimates typically seen in anxiety patients. Habituation of anxiety during exposure can then lower the exaggerated perceived costs if the individual attributes their reduced anxiety to aspects of the social situation (e.g., "If I am not anxious, the situation cannot be that bad"). If repeated role plays lead to mild criticism no longer causing physiological arousal, the patient will no longer view criticism as catastrophic. The model predicts that inflated cost is more likely to contribute to social anxiety than overestimated probabilities of negative outcomes. This has been confirmed by several independent studies (Foa, Franklin, Perry & Herbert, 1996; Hofmann, 2004).

Individuals with SAD often assess their social performance more negatively than non-anxious individuals, even when actual performance differences are controlled for (Wallace and Alden, 1995; Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993). As a result, socially anxious individuals frequently question their ability to make a positive impression on others (Wallace & Alden, 1995) and anticipate failing to meet others' expectations (Wallace and Alden, 1991; Wallace & Alden, 1991, 1997). Consequently, it has been suggested that social anxiety emerges when individuals wish to make a specific impression on others but doubt their ability to do so (Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014).

All of these theoretical accounts place an important emphasis on the self and self-perception. Individuals with a high sensitivity toward self-focused attention and a negative view of themselves as social objects will experience discomfort towards evaluative feedback, whether it is negative or positive. It is a common experience that patients with SAD are similarly uncomfortable watching themselves perform the recording of a social task than doing the actual performance. The reason obviously is that viewing the recording of oneself confronts the person with his/her own self by enhancing self-focused attention. The various studies provide direct and indirect support for this notion.

Although the matter is far from settled, the time might be ripe to re-define SAD not merely as an excessive fear of negative evaluation but to broaden the core problem to define SAD as a heightened sensitivity toward self-focused attention, combined with a negative perception of the social aspects of one's self. Although we need to acknowledge the heterogeneity within the diagnostic SAD category, heightened self-focus is commonly experienced by people with SAD. Negative evaluation readily accentuates negative self-perception. But even positive evaluation by others can activate the negative self-schema for a number of reasons. For example, the person with SAD might not believe the feedback to be genuinely positive, or the positive feedback might be viewed as conditional (i.e., the person said she liked X about me, but she probably didn't like many other things but is too polite to say it), or the feedback now raises the perceived social standards (e.g., because the person now expects me to display the same behavior again in the future and I was just lucky this time). In other words, some individuals with SAD might see positive evaluation merely as a Trojan horse containing many negative aspects of oneself. On a more general level, it also possible that sensitivity to self-focused attention is akin to anxiety sensitivity in people with panic disorder, which is considered a trait. As a result, any form of self-focused attention, whether positive, negative, (or even neutral), might cause distress because of the person's heightened sensitivity to social feedback. This places the self and self-perception front and center in social anxiety. Thus, it is not the valence of the feedback that elicits SA is some people, but rather the focus on the self that triggers the feeling.

In conclusion, because the self is such an important aspect of social anxiety, we need to be careful when drawing simple parallels between animals and humans, which is what we do when we develop an evolutionary model of social anxiety or when we develop animal models of social anxiety. Targeting such self-related processes seems central when treating many individuals suffering from excessive social anxiety.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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