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Anxiety, Gender, and Impression Formation

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Abstract

A great deal of research on impression formation has revealed that a multitude of factors influence impression formation, and that anxiety has a negative influence on these impressions. Yet despite a wide body of research it remains unclear how gender perceptions of anxiety, and the stereotypes associated with anxiety, impact the impressions formed of anxious individuals. In order to investigate this further, it has been hypothesized that males and females will: (a) view a non-anxious gender-neutral target as a member of the same gender, and (b) view an anxious gender-neutral target as a member of the opposite gender. In a study examining these effects, 80 participants (40 males and 40 females), were presented with a scenario of a gender-neutral anxious or non-anxious target and then asked to evaluate, and allocate a gender to the individual presented. The following study will further examine these hypotheses, with an in-depth assessment of the results and their implications.

Anxiety, Gender, and Impression Formation

Impression formation is an important aspect of everyday life. Making a positive first impression is beneficial when interacting with peers, at a job interview, and in other aspects of day-to-day living. Impression formation is the process through which individuals form opinions of others. It is a complex, yet relatively unconscious process in which an individual views another individual's behaviour, makes assumptions, and draws conclusions about the inner qualities of that target individual (Baron, Byrne, & Branscombe, 2006). First impressions are long lasting and it is therefore beneficial to make positive, lasting impressions when meeting another individual for the first time. A wide body of research has identified numerous factors that can have both positive and negative influences on impression formation.

One factor known to have a negative impact on impression formation is anxiety, and this has been demonstrated through numerous studies. When an individual experiences anxiety, especially in more drastic forms, it can be difficult to produce favourable impressions, and an individual might not have the opportunity to present his or her true inner qualities, leading to a poor evaluation of character and competence. Anxiety is defined as being the unpleasant feeling of fear and apprehension accompanied by increased physiological arousal (Davison, Neale, Blankstein, & Flett, 2005). Individuals can experience anxiety in a variety of forms and strengths and their anxiety has an impact on how they are perceived by others and how they in turn perceive other individuals around them. In a series of studies completed by Purdon, Antony, Monteiro and Swinson (1999), it was discovered that (i) the anxiety experienced by an observing individual has no effect on the impressions formed of a non-anxious target individual; and (ii) mutual anxiety experienced by both the observing individual and the target individual leads to more negative impressions of the target individual. These findings indicate that although individuals who experience some form of social anxiety view themselves more negatively than

individuals who do not (Spurr & Stopa, 2002; Curtis & Locke, 2005), these feelings do not translate into the impressions formed of a non-anxious target individual. As well, the findings from the study indicate that an individual experiencing any form of social anxiety would not empathize with an anxious target, even though the observer is in the exact same position and would expect empathy in return in a similar situation.

Past research has also demonstrated that group membership neutralizes the negative perceptions held of anxious individuals. Carron, Estabrooks, Horton, Prapavessis, and Hausenblas (1999) examined how women would be perceived in either a high anxiety or low anxiety causing situation in a group of friends that were (a) all female, (b) all male, or (c) male and female. An unknown observer rated the female as less anxious in all situations, even when the target reported feelings of anxiety, suggesting that group membership gives every individual the opportunity to share responsibilities of self-presentation evaluation. In another study completed by Swann, Kwan, Polzer and Milton (2003), group identification, creativity, and impression formation in first year masters of business administration students was examined. Again impressions formed of group members were more positive when examining the group as a whole, compared to the impressions formed of individual members, demonstrating that anxiety of individual members is diffused when part of a group. There is a great understanding of how anxiety impacts the impression formation process. However, it is also of importance to examine how perceptions of anxiety differ in males and females.

Stereotypes are the standardized images that are held of specific groups, and hold certain meanings, and are associated with the male and female socially prescribed gender roles. The stereotypes associated with these gender roles play an important role in the gender differences in anxiety perceptions. Socially prescribed gender roles vary significantly and help to define the skills, behaviours, and beliefs of males and females in all aspects life. The social role theory

outlines that men are more assertive, controlling, aggressive, and independent; while women are more sensitive, communal, reserved, and cooperative (Bolino, & Turnley, 2003; Guadagno, & Cialdini, 2007, p. 485). Women are stereotypically more anxious than males, so this behaviour is more readily acceptable among females. In addition to the gender stereotypes associated with anxiety, it is known and females are in fact more susceptible than males to anxiety disorders (Lewinsohn, Gotlib, Lewinsohn, Seeley & Allen, 1998). Lewinsohn et al (1998) examined the gender differences in susceptibility to anxiety disorders. It was found that, while females do in fact display greater tendencies to anxiety disorders, both males and females equally experience anxiety symptoms in general situations, and define anxiety differently (Lewinsohn et al, 1998).

An extensive body of research has demonstrated that anxiety is perceived negatively and will result in more negative impressions formed of a target individual. Individuals will be inclined to attribute anything negative to something different from the self because they will avoid associating with things that are negative. With this idea in mind, it is known that individuals prefer other individuals who appear to be the same, or that share similar characteristics (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004); and that individuals, whether male or female, who deviate from the social norm of socially prescribed gender roles are viewed more negatively than those that do not (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007). Therefore, individuals who appear to be different, or display a perceived negative quality such as anxiety, should be viewed in a more negative way because they are different. Therefore when presented with a gender-neutral anxious target individual, that individual should be perceived as a member of the opposite gender. It is on this idea that the following study is based. In order to better understand these differences it has been hypothesized that (a) anxious targets will be viewed more negatively than non-anxious targets; (b) a non-anxious, gender neutral target will be identified as a member of the same gender; and (c) an anxious, gender-neutral target will be identified as a member of the opposite gender.

Method

Participants

Eighty individuals participated in this study, 40 males and 40 females. Participants were undergraduates at Algoma University College and were recruited primarily from classes in the psychology programme, specifically from the two introductory psychology courses offered during the winter semester. Students were also recruited from other psychology courses, and from courses offered in unrelated programmes. As an incentive to recruit participants, a one half percent bonus credit was offered to students enrolled in courses where professors had agreed to offer bonus credits for thesis participation.

Materials

One of two possible scenarios was presented to participants, one being a description of a gender-neutral anxious target, and the other being a description of a gender-neutral non-anxious target. Both scenarios were approximately the same length, and were developed for use in the study. The first scenario, of the anxious target was 273 words long. The following is a brief excerpt from the scenario; “Before the first lecture is scheduled to start, the graduate student interacts minimally with students while quietly preparing for the lecture . . . During the delivery of the lecture material, the graduate student speaks fairly quietly and at the beginning has a shaky voice (which steadies after a short while), and avoids making eye contact with the audience.” See Appendix A: Phase I: Scenario of Gender-Neutral, Anxious Target, for the complete scenario). The second scenario, of the non-anxious target, was 260 words long. The following is a brief excerpt from the scenario; “Before the first lecture is scheduled to start, the graduate student is conversing with students seated near the front of the class . . . During the delivery of the lecture material, the graduate student is well spoken and maintains a calm and clear voice, and makes constant eye contact with the audience.” (See Appendix A: Phase I: Scenario of Gender-Neutral,

Anxious Target, for the complete scenario). The target presented in both scenarios only differed in outward displays of anxiety, and both targets presented were described as being equally competent and delivered a lecture that was well understood by students.

Design and Procedure

The study design was a 2x2 between groups design. Male and female participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions: (i) a gender-neutral anxious target, and (ii) a gender-neutral non-anxious target. Twenty participants, arranged into all male and all female groups, participated in each experimental condition. The study was paper based and only required participants to come in for one session and was completed in three phases. Each phase of the study was contained in its own envelope, and participants were instructed to complete each phase, return it to the envelope and seal it before moving on to the next phase. This was to ensure that participants could not go back and review the earlier phases and potentially influence the answers provided to questions in later phases.

Phase I

At the beginning of the study participants received a short description of a graduate student explaining that the person was considering becoming a professor at a university following graduation, and that the student would fill in on a few lectures to get a better idea of what it would be like to run a class. After reading this brief introduction, participants proceeded onto phase one of the study, in which they were to read the scenario provided. During phase one of the study, participants received one of two possible scenarios. The scenario was of either a gender-neutral anxious target, or a gender-neutral non-anxious target, and was a written scenario of graduate student (See appendix A for complete scenarios). The target presented in each scenario was equally competent in delivering the lecture material, and students had a great understanding

of the material at the end of the lecture. The targets only varied on anxiety level, and outward displays of anxiety.

Phase II

During phase two of the study, participants filled out a questionnaire. This questionnaire consisted of 24 questions, including 10 questions that were included as filler questions, and the other 14 questions (see Appendix B) included to measure participants' responses to the target individual. All questions presented in the questionnaire were rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Filler questions were directed toward the participant (i.e. I get good grades in school; I am a leader among my friends). Because filler questions were included to distract participants from the intentions of the study, and these questions were not designed to provide more information in the current study, responses to these questions were not included in data analysis. Responses to filler questions were rated as 1 = not at all like me, 4 = neutral, to 7 = very much like me.

The remaining 14 questions were used to rate the participants' responses to the target individual presented in the scenario. These questions were developed by looking at questions rating gender specific traits, and studies of impression formation. Questions included asking participants to rate the target on specific characteristics that are gender role specific (i.e. The person in the story is a reserved person; The person in the story is outgoing). Questions were also included to determine if participants were able to accurately identify if the target was anxious or not (i.e. The person in the story is anxious; The person in the story seemed insecure). As well, a few questions with an exact opposite were included, to make sure that participants would not just select any response to a question (i.e. The person in the story is more intelligent than most other people; The person in the story is less intelligent than most other people). These questions were rated on a 7-point Likert scale as follows 1 = strongly disagree, 4 = neutral, and 7 = strongly agree.

Phase III

Phase three was the final phase of the study. This phase consisted of a single forced choice question, asking participants to decide if the individual presented in the scenario was either male or female. This final question was presented at the very end of the study, and separate from the question set in phase two, so participants would not be influenced by this question when reading the scenario and answering the questions provided. Upon completion of the study participants were instructed to return all components to the administrator after which they were debriefed and thanked for participating in the study.

Results

Phase III: Assigning a Gender to a Neutral Target

As predicted, when presented with an anxious, gender-neutral target, males and females identified such target as a member of the opposite gender (See figure 1) Female participants identified an anxious target as male 70% of the time ($n = 14$); male participants also identified the target as female 70% of the time ($n = 14$). Both male and female participants identified the anxious target as a member of the same gender 30% of the time ($n = 6$). These results were statistically significant $\chi^2(1, n = 40) = 6.4, p < 0.05$. When presented with a non-anxious, gender-neutral target, males and females consistently identified the target as a member of the same sex (see Figure 2). Females identified a non-anxious, gender-neutral target as female 95% of the time ($n = 19$), and only 5% identified the target as being male ($n = 1$). Males were more split when assigning a gender to the target, 45% identified the target as being male ($n = 9$), and 55% identified the target as being female ($n = 11$). However, despite male participants being split in their decisions when assigning a gender to the gender-neutral target, these results were statistically significant $\chi^2(1, n = 40) = 8.533, p < 0.05$.

Phase II: Ratings of Anxious and Non-Anxious Targets

It was hypothesized that anxious targets would be viewed more negatively than non-anxious targets. Analysis of the data from the question set administered in phase two of this study found that all participants correctly identified whether the target was anxious ($n = 40$, $M = 5.175$, $SD = 1.083$), or non-anxious ($n = 40$, $M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.061$), these results however, were not statistically significant $t(39) = 10.73$, $p \gg \gg 0.25$. Participants also tended to identify the anxious (insecure) ($n = 40$, $M = 1.8$, $SD = 0.99$), and non-anxious (confident) behaviours ($n = 40$, $M = 6.35$, $SD = 0.66$) of the target individual, but these results again were not statistically significant $t(39) = -24.036$, $p \gg \gg 0.25$. When asked the same question, but focused on the insecure behaviours, participants tended to answer in relatively the same manner, but again these differences were not statistically significant. When answering the other questions in the question set, participants tended to answer the questions in the same manner regardless of the target being anxious or non-anxious, and overall the anxious target was not perceived more negatively than the non-anxious target. T-tests were conducted (as shown in Table 1) to examine the differences between participants' responses to each question in the question set related to the presented target, but overall results were not statistically significant.

Table 1: Participant Ratings of Anxious and Non-Anxious Target on Phase II Question Set

Question Set	Anxious Target		Non-Anxious Target		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Outgoing	3.05	1.413307	5.475	1.131994	-8.16	39	2.90x10-10
Competent	5.25	1.315587	5.775	1.025008	-1.74	39	0.0450
More Intelligent	4.275	1.061868	4.975	1.329883	-2.56	39	0.0072
Less Intelligent	2.475	1.085747	2.25	0.898717	1.12	39	0.1348
Confident	1.8	0.992278	6.35	0.662164	-24.036	39	2.72x10-25
Shy	5.675	0.997111	2.35	0.975337	14.61	39	1.04x10-17
Anxious	5.175	1.083383	2.55	1.060962	10.73	39	1.68x10-13
Ambitious	4.65	1.291987	5.375	1.004796	-2.66	39	0.0056
Reliable	5.25	1.103607	5.3	1.01779	-0.21	39	0.419
Lazy	2.475	1.085747	2.25	0.839719	0.88	39	0.191
Independent	4.85	1.188621	5.35	0.975337	-2.02	39	0.025
Reserved	4.95	1.036513	3.35	1.02657	7.17	39	6.19x10-9
Insecure	5.75	1.255756	1.55	0.597001	18.27	39	5.05x10-21
Attractive	4.275	0.933356	5.05	1.084861	-4.201	39	7.37x10-05

Discussion

The first hypothesis for this study was that anxious targets would be viewed more negatively than non-anxious targets, as has been demonstrated in previous studies. Results revealed that participants were able to accurately identify whether the presented target was anxious or non-anxious, and the responses were statistically significant. However, when presented with other questions assessing the participants responses to the target individual there were no significant results, both anxious and non-anxious targets were rated relatively the same. This could be attributed to the fact that the questions used in phase two of the study were developed specifically for the study and therefore lacked internal validity. As well, the questions used might not have been a good measure of participants initial impressions of the target as the questions might not have had clear answers in the scenarios, leaving participants to provide a best possible guess. As well, there is also the possibility that participants answered questions in a more favourable way to benefit the study if they knew that the study was looking at impression formation.

According to the gender stereotypes associated with anxiety, and the greater acceptance of anxiety displays in females because of their socially prescribed gender roles, anxious individuals should be perceived as female. However, it is known that all individuals use stereotypes to identify others that are different from themselves, therefore the presentation of a gender-neutral target should be perceived as a member of the opposite gender, rather than follow the typical stereotypes. This idea was the foundation on which the hypotheses were formulated and this study was developed. It had been hypothesized that participants (the observers) would identify an anxious target individual (in this case, a graduate student presented in a written scenario) as a member of the opposite gender, while identifying non-anxious individuals as the same gender. According to the results obtained in this study, the hypotheses were correct, in that the gender

stereotypes did not hold up with the presentation of a gender-neutral target, therefore suggesting that other factors might also contribute to this very complex process. Future research should investigate other factors that could potentially have an impact on the combination of stereotypes and the impression formation processes. It would be interesting to determine if other gender stereotypes are diminished with the presentation of a gender-neutral target, and to determine why this is in fact the case. It would also be beneficial to include more participants from a more generalized population, as it is possible that results could be attributed to participants having at least some background knowledge on impression formation, as most participants were currently enrolled in psychology courses within the university at the time the study was completed.

Conclusions

Impression formation is a complex process that is influenced by many different factors. Yet despite the significant amount of research dedicated to gaining a better understanding of this process that is prevalent in all individuals' daily lives, there are still questions that remain unanswered. A better understanding of the impression formation process and the factors that can have a negative influence on the impressions formed of others is needed. A better understanding of this complex process can provide individuals with a better understanding of how to reduce those characteristics that can yield more negative first impressions so that the best possible impressions can be achieved on a consistent basis. As well, a better knowledge of the stereotypes associated with anxious individuals could possibly lead to a better acceptance and tolerance of those individuals who do experience elevated levels of anxiety in their daily lives. Future research can be of benefit to dispel those stereotypes and negative perceptions of anxious individuals.

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identification and creativity in diverse groups: The role of individuation and self-verification. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 1396-1406.

Figures

Figure 1: Male and female participants (observers) gender assignment to a gender-neutral anxious target. Twenty female and male participants were in each experimental manipulation.

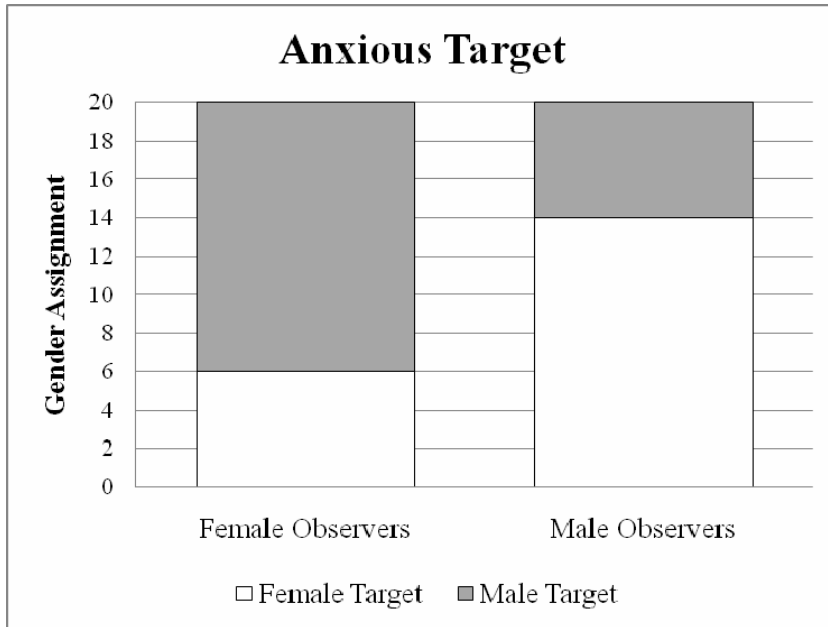
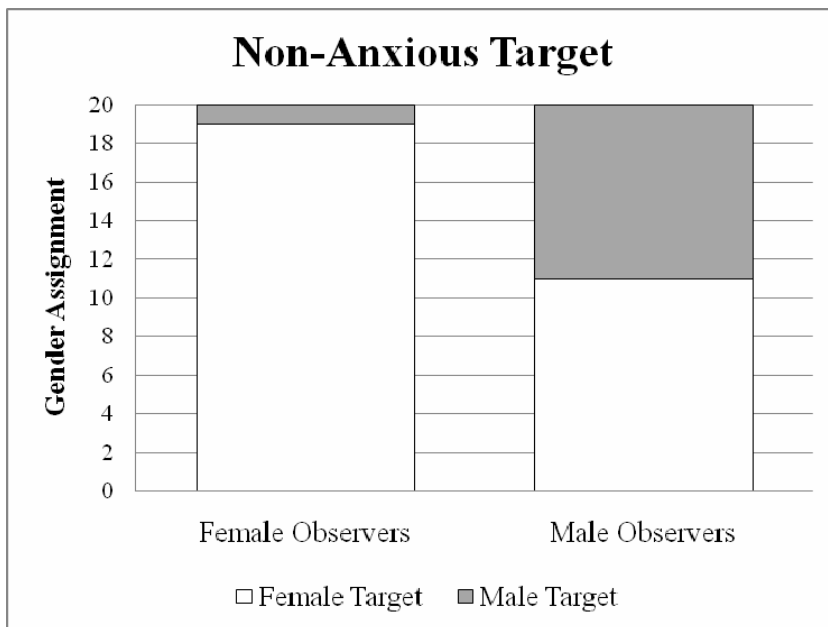


Figure 2: Male and female participants (observers) gender assignment to a gender-neutral non-anxious target. Twenty female and male participants were in each experimental manipulation.



Appendix A

Phase I: Scenario of Gender-Neutral, Anxious Target

Before the first lecture is scheduled to start, the graduate student interacts minimally with students while quietly preparing for the lecture by setting up overhead projectors and handing out notes. The lecture starts promptly, and after a brief personal introduction, the lecture topics for the next few classes are introduced and students are invited to ask questions if anything becomes unclear.

The lecture begins and power point slides are used to accompany the handouts provided at the start of the class. The slides and notes provided have a good layout, and are clear and easy to follow. In addition to the power point presentation, a variety of interactive activities are also used to help demonstrate the concepts being taught. During the delivery of the lecture material, the graduate student speaks fairly quietly and at the beginning has a shaky voice (which steadies after a short while), and avoids making eye contact with the audience. It is also evident that the graduate student is uncomfortable, has trembling hands, and remains in one place while presenting the material.

The subject material is quite interesting and is presented in a way that keeps students interested throughout the duration of the class. As students ask questions, the graduate student seems caught off guard and often blushes but the answers provided remain focused and on track with the lecture and are answered in a clear and easily understood manner that also offers a different perspective of the presented material.

As the first lecture comes to an end, students have a thorough understanding of the material. The lecture was focused, remained on topic, and overall was a solid lecture.

Phase I: Scenario of Gender-Neutral, Non-Anxious Target

Before the first lecture is scheduled to start, the graduate student is conversing with students seated near the front of the class while preparing by setting up overhead projectors and handing out notes. The lecture starts promptly, and after a brief personal introduction, the lecture topics for the next few classes are introduced and students are invited to ask questions if anything becomes unclear.

The lecture begins and power point slides are used to accompany the handouts provided at the start of the class. The slides and notes provided have a good layout, and are clear and easy to follow. In addition to the power point presentation, a variety of interactive activities are also used to help demonstrate the concepts being taught. During the delivery of the lecture material, the graduate student is well spoken and maintains a calm and clear voice, and makes constant eye contact with the audience. It is also evident that the graduate student is comfortable at the front of the class, and moves around comfortably while presenting the material.

The subject material is quite interesting and is presented in a way that keeps students interested throughout the duration of the class. As students ask questions, the answers provided remain focused and on track with the lecture and are answered in a clear and easily understood manner that also offers a different perspective of the presented material.

As the first lecture comes to an end, students have a thorough understanding of the material. The lecture was focused, remained on topic, and overall was a solid lecture.

Appendix B

Phase II: Question Set, does not include filler questions.

1. The person in the story is outgoing.
2. The person in the story is competent.
3. The person in the story is more intelligent than most other people.
4. The person in the story is less intelligent than most other people.
5. The person in the story seemed confident (i.e. confident voice, seemed comfortable in front of the class, able to maintain good eye contact with the audience).
6. The person in the story is shy.
7. The person in the story is anxious.
8. The person in the story is ambitious.
9. The person in the story is a reliable person.
10. The person in the story is a lazy person.
11. The person in the story is an independent person (i.e. able to think make own decisions, and come up with own ideas regardless of what other people may do or think).
12. The person in the story is a reserved person.
13. The person in the story seemed insecure (i.e. stammering/shaky voice, uncomfortable in front on the class, unable to maintain eye contact with the audience).
14. If you were to meet the person in the story in, they would be attractive (i.e. well put together, wearing clothing that is in style, and good looking whether male or female).