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978-1-107-00719-2 - Social Phobia: An Interpersonal Approach

Ariel Stravynski

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Social Phobia

Social phobia is a disorder involving an intense fear of being judged by others and it affects the lives of many people. This book takes a critical stance toward the received view of social phobia as a disease of sorts, characterized by abnormal anxiety and caused by an inner mental or physical defective mechanism. Ariel Stravynski adopts an alternative approach to social phobia – as a purposeful interpersonal pattern protective against public humiliation or private rebuff. In this conception, fearfulness is the emotional facet of the socially phobic interpersonal pattern, rather than its driving force. This theoretical framework emphasizing dynamic transactions is articulated in terms of an anthropological psychology and Stravynski argues that social phobia can only be formulated and understood in interpersonal terms. He integrates all available knowledge on social phobia into his proposed framework and exemplifies its application by extending it to the assessment and treatment of the disorder.

ARIEL STRAVYNSKI is Professor of Clinical Psychology in the Department of Psychology at the University of Montreal and has been studying social phobia for more than thirty years. He is the author of *Fearing Others: The Nature and Treatment of Social Phobia* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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To Marsha

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*“[T]he secret of harvesting from existence the greatest
fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is – to live
dangerously!”*

Nietzsche

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Preface

In the pages of this book, I shall state the case for approaching social phobia interpersonally. My main argument is simple: social phobia can be coherently described only in interpersonal terms. Furthermore, from that vantage point, everything known about social phobia coalesces into a coherent whole, meaningful and understandable.

Having, as I hope, successfully made that point at mid book, I shall go further and argue in the Conclusions (Part V) that social phobia can be understood only from that perspective. Perhaps recklessly, I hope to convince the reader of the value of that point of view.

If history teaches us anything, it is safe to say that all theories are doomed from the outset – bound to be proven wrong and superseded. Why then add another one? Perhaps this query is best answered by another question: is there any other way of advancing knowledge?

On a utilitarian level, this book is intended as a companion volume to *Fearing Others: the Nature and Treatment of Social Phobia* (2007).

Fearing Others was a study of social phobia in all its aspects. The natural upshot of engaging in such a wide-ranging overview was dealing with different bodies of theory and research on their own terms; most adhered to the received view of social phobia as a species of disease – a disorder of anxiety – that in turn is brought about by a defective inner mechanism – either physical or mental.

The untenable assumptions and conceptual flaws within each approach and the glaring incongruities between their claims allow – I daresay, call for – an alternative point of view, encompassing and harmonizing narrowly partial and blinkered perspectives.

In the final integrative chapter of *Fearing Others*, I outlined an alternative theoretical framework – interpersonal in nature – as one likely to provide the most comprehensive explanatory framework, integrating *all* current knowledge.

My purpose in writing this volume is to elaborate the integrative interpersonal theoretical framework for social phobia – presented in embryo form in *Fearing Others*. In the current volume, I seek to present a

comprehensive argument for that point of view, set in, what I take to be, secure and defensible first principles. It is found in Part I.

Furthermore, in this volume, I consider the applied implications of the interpersonal approach, by extending its principles to assessment and treatment. By recasting social phobia, as well as the conceptual framework for alleviating or overcoming it, both are put on an integrated and coherent theoretical footing that accords with all current knowledge.

While the claim that the interpersonal approach clarifies social phobia best must rest mostly on its own merits, it is nevertheless justified, in part, by the conceptual flaws of currently received views of it. It is, however, the failure of research to give support to those notions that in my view decisively opens the door to a radically different kind of theorizing put forward in this book. Thus, I regard a critical scrutiny of the main contemporary body of ideas and the research it has generated as essential in providing a contrast against which the interpersonal theory of social phobia may be all the more sharply drawn. Questioning received ideas requires recasting these in alternative terms.

Substantively speaking, the second and third parts of the book are organized as an intellectual debate, pitting as it were, contrasting voices. On the one hand, we hear of social phobia construed as a disorder of anxiety. As a disease of sorts, caused by a putative inner malfunctioning, it is meant to be wholly distinct from “healthy” normality. On the other hand, social phobia is construed as a pragmatic construct, characterized by a fearful self-protective interpersonal pattern enacted for safety’s sake; it is an exacerbation of social and emotional normality, distinct from it only functionally. It is evoked and modulated by (fearsome) social circumstances and individuals.

Needless to say, these divergent points of departure result in profoundly different ramifications. The differences are most glaringly apparent in matters of causality. Causality, however defined, is at the heart of any attempt to understand what is being studied. Two vocal lines, again, are heard.

While the received biomedical outlook (social phobia as disease) is resolutely reductionist (i.e. looking for malfunctioning elements within the person) and dualist (i.e. distinguishing sharply between body and mind), the (holistic) interpersonal perspective looks to the social life of undivided living individuals. It is seeking to understand social phobia in relational terms, as an extended pattern of transactions with others, in culturally fashioned social settings and mores. In this sense, social phobia will be identified as an extended fearful pattern of self-protection, enacted purposefully, against the threats embodied by other individuals

in the social environment. Formulated in these terms, social phobia is enacted, not something one has.

Counterpoint – to borrow a musical notion – joins distinct voices, resonating against each other to create a richer texture of sound. By analogy, a richly textured picture of what is at stake necessitates, in my view, a substantive presentation (and critical consideration) of the biomedical outlook and – in keeping with its dualism and reductive mechanical logic – the research it generates.

As a consequence, the present book overlaps to some extent with *Fearing Others*. All the same, the relevant chapters or their parts, although covering similar ground, have been revised and updated. Furthermore, as elements in a different whole, these may be considered as having been, to a certain extent, transfigured. Practically, this has the additional advantage of allowing the current monograph to be self-contained and read on its own.

In that sense, it affords some independence gained painlessly. Every independent step, however small, furthers autonomy.

Autonomy – as I shall argue later – is to some extent a mirror image of the socially phobic pattern and, as such, a manner of being much prized by the interpersonal approach. From the interpersonal perspective, independence of thought and action are virtues highly recommended to those wishing to escape the narrow confines of a socially phobic life. By analogy, it may be beneficial to readers attuned to receive ideas as well.

Unlike Odysseus, who had to be attached to his ship's mast to resist the bewitching song of the sirens, we are fortunately not exposed to such beguiling and seductive singing. Autonomy, as practiced in this book, will be to turn away from the popular (received) refrain and to go one's own way. *Sapere aude!*

Autonomy, however, is not without its own risks. While challenging received ideas might be satisfying to the writer, shedding these could be disturbing to the reader. Taking it further, enacting new (and perhaps subversive) convictions might displease others and could possibly have – as the socially phobic have long suspected – unpleasant consequences. *Caveat emptor!*

At this point, the cautious reader might wonder as to what he or she has let themselves in for and wish to know something (perhaps reassuring) about the general orientation of the author. Briefly, I would describe my outlook as naturalistic. It is naturalistic in the sense of inclining towards observing life as it is lived – rooted in its natural, social and cultural habitat. In my view, any theorizing must accord with this; it is the only secure foundation for any conceptual enterprise. Such naturalism imposes a certain discipline: observation must take precedence over speculation;

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observation has to take in everything within its purview and cannot be partial or arbitrary.

Substantively speaking and by extrapolation, I take it as axiomatic that only whole living beings – as opposed to minds or brains, for instance – engage in social life or conduct it fearfully. Similarly, fearful self-protection from harm (e.g. fleeing, “freezing”) is made up of purposeful activities that only whole living creatures are capable of. Fearing and protecting oneself are features of the integrated activity of a whole individual; they are not separate, let alone independent activities. Nor do these occur in a vacuum.

Need it be emphasized that social life can only be engaged in with other people, in the social settings where they are to be found? Fearful and other emotional states permeating social behavior are elicited by and directed toward dangerous social circumstances – either tangible or foreseen. In the latter case, the fearful reaction is acted out imaginatively.

Social life is a human necessity; even the fearful pursue it relentlessly, albeit in a distinct mode. Without social life, such a relational pattern as social phobia is baffling, pointless and unintelligible.

Schopenhauer (2001, §396) saw it in this way:

On a cold winter’s day, a group of porcupines huddled together to stay warm and keep from freezing. But soon they felt one another’s quills and moved apart. When the need for warmth brought them closer together again, their quills again forced them apart. They were driven back and forth at the mercy of their discomforts until they found the distance from one another that provided both a maximum of warmth and a minimum of pain.

Fearsome (or prickly) others and fearfulness (pain) form an inextricable unity. Attempting to understand fearfulness without reference to the object of fear (i.e. the menacing context – individuals and the social setting) is misguided and unsatisfactory; if elevated to principle, it is willfully mystifying.

The title of this book (as well as its subject matter) is social phobia. This bucks current trends favoring the label of “social anxiety disorder,” originating in the DSM-IV and continued in the DSM-5. In both, social phobia appears in parentheses, implying perhaps that the term (social phobia) has been eclipsed and superseded. My choice of the term, however, is deliberate, and therefore requires justification.

The historic term of “social phobia” hints at its genealogy (see Stravynski, 2007, pp. 16–24), tracing the rich intellectual trajectory of the hypothetical construct that it identifies and delineates. Crucially, the term relates to a description of the construct that it names. In other words, it tells us what social phobia is.

Abandoning such a conception has turned social phobia into a putative disease entity, and requiring, as such, no description but only criteria for its identification (“diagnosis”). Furthermore, by being proclaimed an “anxiety disorder,” “social anxiety disorder” is saddled with a presumed “etiology” (anxiety). Taken together, this is what “social anxiety disorder” stands for.

By contrast with “social phobia,” which emerged from an extended intellectual debate, “social anxiety disorder” is the creation of the DSM-IV task force, which “rebranded” social phobia by administrative fiat to align it better with “other anxiety disorders.” This is perpetuated in the DSM-5.

If the above reasoning is accurate, the adoption of the term “social anxiety disorder” implicitly endorses the position of the DSM-IV and the DSM-5, construing social phobia as a disease entity caused by abnormal anxiety (itself brought on by some inner malfunctioning).

As I shall be persistently contesting these complacent assumptions in the pages of this book (while simultaneously putting forward an alternative position), I find I have no choice but to keep a critical distance from “social anxiety disorder.” Bear with me, gentle reader.

Personal needs for self-expression aside, the writing of the book was sparked and sustained by the hope that the interpersonal theoretical framework presented in it will inspire researchers, clinicians and advanced students to adopt it so as to grapple with, investigate or disprove its main theses. The interpersonal perspective, I believe, allows the scaling of greater heights and affords a far better view, with a relatively undisturbed vista, of what social phobia is. For those seeking a deeper understanding, unfettered by intellectually irrelevant constraints, it points in a more promising direction, unseen from the lower ground.

As to the specific contents of the book, Part I (Chapter 1) presents a reasoned justification for the choice of an interpersonal level of analysis towards the understanding of social phobia, as well as its inevitable, somewhat philosophical foundations. On the basis of these first principles, the thesis of a relational social phobia is set out. This general formulation is broken up in several hypotheses; some supporting evidence is provided.

Part II concerns the search for the proper characterization of social phobia and its identity.

Chapter 2 analyzes the main assumptions underlying the received view of social phobia as a disorder of anxiety and finds them wanting. It argues, first of all, that social phobia cannot be characterized in terms of anxiety, however the term is defined. Secondly, social phobia cannot literally be considered a natural (disease) entity.

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If this assessment is accurate, the current characterization of social phobia is ill-fitting. In those terms, social phobia remains a cipher and needs to be re-imagined. This is done in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 provides an interpersonal characterization of social phobia. Rather than a breakdown in normal functioning due to abnormal anxiety, social phobia is understood in purposeful terms. It is envisaged as consisting of a web of self-protective, fearful transactions, enacted by the socially phobic in interactions with menacing individuals; all such transactions take place in culturally meaningful social settings.

Since the main features of social phobia are in continuity with normal traits, social phobia ought to be considered an exacerbation of normality. Nonetheless, a practical need for a categorical nomenclature exists. Such a category, however, ought to be explicitly declared as a “pragmatic” one, created to meet practical needs. The distinction between a “pragmatic” and a “natural” (disease) category is discussed.

Part III deals with matters of causality; it examines confusing and confused issues, fraught with difficulty. One wanders into this area at one’s own peril; it is not for the faint-hearted.

In Chapters 4 and 5 our gaze turns inwards, as it were, in search of what makes social phobia tick. The former peers into the body or rather, the socially phobic brain, while the latter attempts to read the socially phobic “mind.”

Chapter 4 presents the biomedical account of social phobia and concentrates on the main attempts to identify brain abnormalities: studies of neurotransmission and brain activity. A related issue, concerning genetic transmission (of the putative abnormalities), is also examined. Dimensions, on which the socially phobic, on average, differ statistically from contrast groups, are correlates of social phobia – not its causes. The “pathophysiology” of social phobia proves elusive.

Chapter 5 outlines the mental (malfunctioning) account of social phobia and surveys the resulting research. It argues that the “cognitive biases” and beliefs attendant on social phobia are some of its (many) features. These “cognitive” features of social phobia are its correlates, rather than its cause.

Chapter 6 presents a multi-causal analysis of social phobia, conducted at the interpersonal level. This analysis locates causality without. It emphasizes the purposeful nature of the socially phobic pattern of conduct, its defensive organization for the sake of safety, as well as the crucial role of the social context that evokes and molds the protean socially phobic pattern.

Although not directly dealing with causality, the historic nature of the emerging socially phobic pattern of conduct is very relevant to it. The

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factors contributing to the consolidation of the socially phobic pattern and its further evolution are identified and discussed.

Part IV presents the principles framing the applications of the interpersonal approach to assessment and treatment.

These follow closely the analysis of causality described in Chapter 6. Assessment and functional analysis (Chapter 7) and treatment (Chapter 8) are illustrated by means of three cases.

Part V (Chapter 9) makes the case, first of all, for the interpersonal level of analysis as being autonomous and not reducible to other “lower” levels of analysis. Secondly, it concentrates on the explanatory power of the interpersonal theory of social phobia. This framework is able to encompass all available knowledge touching on the nature of social phobia, its causal analysis and treatment. Thirdly, it argues that social phobia can only be characterized in interpersonal terms; all other accounts, narrowly focusing on the socially phobic state of anxiousness, fail to do so.

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In my attempt to assimilate a vast range of publications, I have been most ably assisted by Angela Kyparissis. Starting off as a doctoral student, she became a collaborator whose opinions I trust and value. Her involvement and interest blew wind into my sails.

From the ideas expressed in the book, it is obvious I owe much to many people. Put differently, if all ideas originating with others were taken away, not much would be left. Nevertheless, the responsibility for weaving the ideas together and all errors committed, either willfully or absent-mindedly, are mine alone.