

The Tall Tree Catches the Wind: Fear of Positive Evaluation in Socially Anxious Individuals

Authors: Ye Youcai, Lin Rongmao, Yan Youwei, Lin Rongmao, Yan Youwei

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Abstract

Fear of positive evaluation is a core feature that can effectively differentiate social anxiety from depression. Fear of positive evaluation refers to an emotional response characterized by fear and consequent worry about positive evaluations from others. Fear of positive evaluation not only causes individuals with social anxiety to exhibit characteristics such as denial of positive cognitions, avoidance of attention, and emotional negativization, but also further exacerbates their cognitive biases and suppresses their positive emotions through de-positivization thinking and interpretive bias, thereby maintaining and exacerbating individuals' social anxiety symptoms. Future research should focus on the application of fear of positive evaluation in education and counseling, as well as studies on the characteristics of fear of positive evaluation in indigenous cultural contexts advocating modesty.

Full Text

Tall Trees Catch Much Wind: Fear of Positive Evaluation in Social Anxiety

YE Youcai, LIN Rongmao, YAN Youwei

(School of Psychology, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350117, China)

Abstract

Fear of positive evaluation (FPE) represents a core feature that effectively distinguishes social anxiety from depressive symptoms. FPE is defined as an emotional response involving fear of and distress about positive evaluation from others. Its role in social anxiety manifests in several ways: it leads individuals to deny positive cognitions, avoid attention, and experience emotional negativity. Furthermore, FPE exacerbates cognitive biases and suppresses positive emotions through disqualification of positive social outcomes and interpretation

bias, thereby maintaining and intensifying social anxiety symptoms. Future research should examine the applications of FPE in education and counseling, as well as investigate its characteristics within the context of Chinese culture, which advocates modesty.

Keywords: Fear of Positive Evaluation, Social Anxiety, Mechanisms of Effect, Modesty

“Even a ‘coward’ fears happiness, gets hurt by cotton, and can even be wounded by happiness.”

—Osamu Dazai, *No Longer Human*

1 Introduction

The Bible recounts a story about the prophet Jonah, who was commanded by God to forgive the sinful city of Nineveh. This was a rare mission and a noble honor, yet when Jonah completed his task, he felt afraid. He hid himself, not wanting to be remembered, feeling unworthy of his reputation, and thus directed everyone’s attention to God. Do we behave similarly in reality? We long for praise from parents or supervisors, yet when faced with compliments, we blush and even want to escape or deny them. This reaction stems from fear of positive evaluation—the discomfort we feel when others evaluate us positively, leading us to avoid or escape such praise (Reichenberger & Blechert, 2018; Weeks et al., 2019). We fear positive evaluation because we worry it will lead to social comparison, making us more conspicuous or placing us in the “spotlight” (Reichenberger et al., 2017; Weeks, 2015), which in turn triggers fear and apprehension.

FPE is a core cognitive characteristic that can effectively differentiate social anxiety from depression (Kocijan & Harris, 2016; Wang et al., 2012; Weeks, 2015; Weeks et al., 2008b). Comorbidity between anxiety and depression is a common clinical phenomenon (Park & Kim, 2020; Spence & Rapee, 2016), and distinguishing between them effectively remains a challenge in clinical assessment and diagnosis (Naragon-Gainey & Watson, 2011). FPE provides a new window for addressing this challenge and is gradually becoming an important cognitive dimension for differential diagnosis of social anxiety disorder. For example, Weeks et al. (2012b) applied the Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale to clinical populations and found good discriminant validity between anxiety and depression scores. Wang et al. (2012) and Weeks (2015) emphasized in their hierarchical model of social anxiety and depression that “fear of positive evaluation is a core feature distinguishing social anxiety disorder from depression.” Some researchers have even proposed including FPE in the diagnostic criteria for social anxiety (Reichenberger et al., 2019; Skocic et al., 2015). Thus, FPE holds significant clinical value for understanding social anxiety disorder, particularly in distinguishing it from depression.

However, few theories have proposed how FPE functions in the development and maintenance of social anxiety symptoms. Based on this gap, we review

the concept and characteristics of FPE, propose its mechanism of action, and discuss future theoretical research and clinical interventions to provide insights for future studies.

2.1.1 Definition of Fear of Positive Evaluation

Previous cognitive models of social anxiety primarily explained how fear of negative evaluation triggers social anxiety symptoms (e.g., Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Fear of negative evaluation is even included in the diagnostic criteria for social anxiety (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, as research has progressed, investigators have discovered that individuals with social anxiety also experience fear of positive evaluation. Weeks et al. (2008a) investigated this phenomenon and first proposed the concept of FPE in 2008. FPE refers to an emotional response involving fear of and distress about positive evaluation from others (Weeks et al., 2008a; Weeks & Howell, 2014). Individuals with social anxiety not only fear negative evaluation but may also become anxious due to positive evaluation from others (Reichenberger & Blechert, 2018; Reichenberger et al., 2017).

The fear of evaluation in socially anxious individuals is universal, regardless of whether the evaluation is positive or negative (Weeks & Howell, 2012a; Liu & Zhang, 2010). Based on this, Weeks et al. proposed the concept of evaluation fear as a core symptom of social anxiety (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Weeks, 2015; Weeks et al., 2008b; Weeks et al., 2008a). Centered on this core symptom, individuals with social anxiety develop various secondary symptoms in cognition, emotion, and behavior. Cognitively, this evaluation fear generates more negative thoughts (Dryman & Heimberg, 2015; Heimberg et al., 2010; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). This occurs because socially anxious individuals excessively concern themselves with others' evaluations, allocating most attentional resources to detecting evaluative cues during social interactions (Liu & Zhang, 2010). When cues indicating potential evaluation appear, they tend to interpret these cues negatively or even catastrophically (Dryman & Heimberg, 2015; Heimberg et al., 2010), thereby exacerbating anxiety symptoms. Behaviorally, to avoid evaluation from others, they engage in numerous avoidance behaviors such as avoiding eye contact or social activities (Keil et al., 2018; Weeks et al., 2019). Emotionally, fearing potential evaluation during social activities generates anticipatory anxiety that far exceeds the actual consequences of evaluation (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

2.1.2 Fear of Positive Evaluation vs. Fear of Negative Evaluation

Initially, researchers tended to view FPE as merely an extension of fear of negative evaluation (Rodebaugh et al., 2012). However, as research advanced, they discovered that these two types of evaluation fear represent independent factor structures (Reichenberger et al., 2015; Rodebaugh et al., 2012; Weeks et al.,

2008b). Weeks and Howell (2012) proposed the most representative Bivalent Fear of Evaluation Model (BFOE), which further elaborated on the differences between the two types of evaluation fear. This model has been validated in both clinical and non-clinical samples (Cook et al., 2019; Dryman et al., 2016; Fredrick & Luebbe, 2020; Weeks & Zoccola, 2016; Yap et al., 2016). Therefore, FPE is not an extension of fear of negative evaluation but rather an independent psychological construct.

The distinctions between FPE and fear of negative evaluation are shown in Table 1. First, their essential difference lies in that FPE minimizes the positive aspects of self-image, whereas fear of negative evaluation maximizes the negative aspects (Weeks, 2015; Weeks et al., 2008a; Yap et al., 2016). Second, FPE stems from concerns about rising social status, while fear of negative evaluation arises from concerns about declining social status. FPE involves anxiety about good performance increasing others' attention and raising their expectations, which may exceed one's capabilities (Weeks & Zoccola, 2016). In contrast, fear of negative evaluation involves worry about poor performance in subsequent social activities (Heimberg et al., 2010; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997), leading to negative evaluation and social costs (Weeks & Zoccola, 2015), prompting individuals to avoid negative evaluation through cognitive or behavioral means (Felmingham et al., 2016; Piccirillo et al., 2016). Thus, FPE and fear of negative evaluation are fundamentally different.

2.2 Evolutionary Interpretation of Fear of Positive Evaluation

Evolutionary psychology offers explanations for the mechanisms underlying FPE. According to this perspective, socially anxious individuals develop FPE primarily for two reasons: positive evaluation raises others' standards and expectations, and it leads to competition (Gilbert, 2014; Yang et al., 2015).

First, FPE raises others' expectations and standards. When an individual in a group receives positive evaluation, they attract more attention, leading other members to form favorable impressions and develop higher expectations (Reichenberger & Blechert, 2018). These positive expectations and attention create invisible pressure, as the individual must exert more effort to maintain this positive image, often beyond their capabilities. Consequently, those receiving positive evaluation may experience anxiety or even fear.

Second, FPE increases interpersonal competition. Evolutionary psychology posits that social hierarchies exist in every group. When an individual receives positive evaluation and attention, their social rank rises, causing higher-status members to perceive them as a threat (Weeks & Howell, 2012a). The individual thus experiences interpersonal competition. To avoid such conflict and threat, they engage in safety behaviors such as denying positive evaluation or avoiding it altogether (Reichenberger & Blechert, 2018). In other words, FPE is an adaptive mechanism that evolved to maximize survival chances in early human

societies (Weeks et al., 2009).

3 Characteristics of Fear of Positive Evaluation

Understanding both FPE and fear of negative evaluation reveals a paradox in socially anxious individuals: they hope to make a good impression before social activities, yet during these activities, they feel uncomfortable with positive evaluation and may even avoid it (Fredrick & Luebbe, 2020). These seemingly contradictory psychological states are not actually in conflict and both manifest in the behavior of socially anxious individuals, who simultaneously hold negative and positive self-images (Weeks & Zoccola, 2016; Weeks et al., 2008a; Yap et al., 2016). FPE minimizes the positive aspects of self-image (Weeks, 2015; Weeks et al., 2013) and affects individuals cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally. In summary, FPE primarily manifests as denial of positive cognition, avoidance of attention, and emotional negativization.

3.1 Denial of Positive Cognition

Denial of positive cognition appears in two aspects: attribution tendencies and accuracy in identifying information. First, regarding attribution tendencies, individuals make more external attributions for positive outcomes (Weeks, 2010; Weeks & Howell, 2012a). In general populations, people exhibit a self-serving bias, attributing positive events internally and negative events externally (Miller & Ross, 1975). However, individuals high in FPE show the opposite pattern: they believe they should be responsible for failures, while successes are unrelated to them (Reichenberger & Blechert, 2018), demonstrating a diminished self-serving bias.

Second, individuals high in FPE show biases in processing and interpreting events. Weeks et al. (2008a) found that FPE negatively correlates with accuracy in perceiving external feedback—the higher the FPE, the more likely individuals are to distort feedback. When facing positive evaluation, high-FPE individuals experience increased discomfort, directing more attentional resources inward and reducing awareness of external information, thereby decreasing accuracy in perceiving feedback (Heimberg et al., 2010; Deng et al., 2018). Additionally, socially anxious individuals may interpret positive or neutral signals negatively, perceiving them as threatening. For example, they might interpret a smile as mockery or interpret the neutral situation “the teacher looks at me during class” as “the teacher thinks I’m not paying attention” (Everaert et al., 2018; Weeks et al., 2008b; Yang et al., 2015).

3.2 Avoidance of Attention

Behaviorally, as a core symptom of social anxiety, safety behaviors and avoidance behaviors also appear in individuals with FPE (Lipton et al., 2016). Research has found that both FPE and fear of negative evaluation correlate with and predict avoidance behaviors (Lipton et al., 2014; Vagos et al., 2016; Zaffar

& Arshad, 2020). For instance, they may avoid group activities or eye contact (Keil et al., 2018; Weeks et al., 2013; Weeks et al., 2019), believing these activities will increase attention and trigger anxiety.

To avoid high expectations and evaluations from others, individuals with FPE also employ strategic failure (Hofmann, 2007; Moscovitch & Hofmann, 2007). Strategic failure refers to actively attempting to fail at the beginning of an activity to lower others' expectations and avoid pressure from high expectations (Baumgardner & Brownlee, 1987). For example, during rehearsals before a performance, individuals may demonstrate skills below their actual level to create a lower, safer behavioral standard. This strategy resembles self-handicapping impression management, where individuals place "obstacles" in the path to success so that if they fail, they can attribute it to these obstacles rather than their ability (Rappo et al., 2017).

3.3 Emotional Negativization

FPE not only increases negative emotions but also reduces positive emotions. First, FPE increases negative emotions. A qualitative interview study by Yang et al. (2015) with socially anxious college students found that when receiving positive evaluation from others, they experienced negative emotions such as shyness, embarrassment, and pressure. Reichenberger et al. (2019) also found in their experiment that participants with higher FPE levels experienced more unpleasantness after watching positive videos (Miedl et al., 2016; Reichenberger et al., 2015).

Second, FPE reduces positive emotions. Reichenberger et al. (2015) found that participants with higher FPE levels showed lower levels of pride after watching positive videos. This result demonstrates that FPE leads to a lack of positive emotional experience and further supports the external attribution tendency in high-FPE individuals: they attribute positive outcomes to external factors (e.g., the other person being cooperative) rather than their own qualities (e.g., being humorous), thus failing to recognize their positive qualities and experience corresponding positive emotions like pride.

4 Mechanism of Action of Fear of Positive Evaluation

Existing theories on social anxiety and FPE primarily supplement the clinical significance of FPE in distinguishing social anxiety from depression (Wang et al., 2012; Weeks, 2015; Weeks et al., 2012b) or describe its clinical features in cognition, emotion, and behavior (Heimberg et al., 2010; Lipton et al., 2016; Reichenberger & Blechert, 2018; Reichenberger et al., 2019). However, progress on the specific mechanisms through which FPE generates and maintains social anxiety symptoms has been relatively slow, and the internal mechanisms remain insufficiently systematic. Based on existing research, we propose a mechanistic model of FPE (Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its generation and maintenance.

As shown in Figure 1, the direct trigger of FPE in socially anxious individuals is the concern that positive evaluation will lead to attention and competition from others. Driven by this fear, individuals develop numerous social anxiety symptoms across cognition, behavior, and emotion to alleviate anxiety, such as externalizing attributions for positive outcomes, engaging in avoidance behaviors, and increasing negative emotions. The function of these symptoms is to reduce positive self-image subjectively or objectively, thereby avoiding others' expectations and competition. This represents the core cognitive function of FPE in social anxiety symptoms. In the process of affecting social anxiety symptoms, FPE generates disqualification of positive social outcomes and interpretation bias, which reduce positive emotions, increase negative emotions and avoidance behaviors, and thus maintain and exacerbate social anxiety symptoms.

4.1 Social Anxiety Symptoms Induced by Fear of Positive Evaluation and Their Functionality

Positive evaluation triggers anxiety and fear. Heimberg et al.'s (2010) cognitive-behavioral model of social anxiety suggests that socially anxious individuals constantly compare their "mental representation of self" with the "self seen by the audience," with external evaluation (positive or negative) serving as an important cue for detecting discrepancies between these two selves. When external evaluative cues indicate a discrepancy, anxiety is triggered, manifesting in cognitive, behavioral, and emotional symptoms. Similarly, in FPE, others' positive evaluation suggests that the audience's view of the self exceeds the mental representation of the self (Heimberg et al., 2010), and anxious individuals believe this excessive expectation will lead to attention or competition, thus triggering fear.

Fear drives anxiety symptoms. Due to fear of attention or competition resulting from positive evaluation, anxious individuals develop numerous emotion-driven behaviors or cognitions to reduce anxiety—these are the social anxiety symptoms driven by FPE. Cognitively, fear of positive evaluation leads to negative interpretations or external attributions for positive outcomes (Everaert et al., 2018; Weeks, 2010; Weeks et al., 2008b), denying or deflecting positive evaluation to alleviate anxiety. Behaviorally, fear of receiving positive evaluation in public social situations leads to avoidance behaviors before events or strategic failure during events to prevent evaluation (Hofmann, 2007; Keil et al., 2018; Weeks et al., 2019). Emotionally, denial or avoidance of positive events reduces positive emotional experiences (Reichenberger et al., 2015), while fear of positive evaluative situations generates additional negative emotions such as anxiety, embarrassment, and shame (Miedl et al., 2016; Reichenberger et al., 2015).

Anxiety symptoms reinforce FPE. Social anxiety symptoms create a process of social negative reinforcement of FPE: through these symptoms (e.g., externalizing positive outcomes, strategic failure, avoidance behaviors), anxious individuals reduce others' positive impressions of them, thereby avoiding positive expectations or potential competition and alleviating their anxiety (Reichen-

berger & Blechert, 2018; Weeks & Zoccola, 2016). In other words, social anxiety symptoms protect individuals from anxiety and fear. When exposed to positive evaluation, they develop symptoms that reduce positive self-image, temporarily alleviating FPE. Over time, individuals' FPE is continuously maintained and strengthened under the protection of these symptoms.

4.2 Role of Fear of Positive Evaluation in Maintaining Social Anxiety Symptoms

Socially anxious individuals develop anxiety symptoms directly due to FPE, and FPE also maintains and exacerbates these symptoms through two core cognitive processes: disqualification of positive social outcomes and interpretation bias. Specifically, FPE leads to disqualification of positive social outcomes, which reduces positive emotions and cognitive activities, while simultaneously triggering interpretation bias, which intensifies negative emotions, negative interpretations, and avoidance behaviors.

4.2.1 Disqualification of Positive Social Outcomes

Socially anxious individuals exhibit a cognitive tendency known as disqualification of positive social outcomes (DPSO), where they externalize attributions for positive experiences and results from social interactions rather than attributing success to their own efforts or abilities (Beck, 1976; Heimberg & Becker, 2002). DPSO serves as an important marker in clinical psychotherapy for determining whether anxiety treatment is improving (Heimberg & Becker, 2002). It includes two components: self-directed and other-directed disqualification. Self-directed DPSO involves self-deprecating statements such as "I often ignore my successes and achievements," while other-directed DPSO involves attributing one's success to others, such as "I could have a good conversation because the other person is talkative" (Weeks, 2010).

DPSO differs from the aforementioned inaccurate identification of information. Inaccurate identification refers to perceiving neutral or positive information as negative, emphasizing the negativization of information (Weeks et al., 2008a). For example, interpreting a smile (positive) as mockery (negative). In contrast, DPSO involves externalizing attributions for positive experiences and results, emphasizing the minimization of positive aspects. For the same situation "someone smiles at me," the interpretation might be "the other person is kind" or "that person usually smiles."

Research indicates that FPE correlates with DPSO (Weeks, 2010); when attributions involve the self, FPE leads to more disqualifying attribution tendencies. Additionally, Weeks et al. (2012a) found that FPE shows a significant negative correlation with positive automatic thoughts, meaning FPE reduces positive thinking activities.

DPSO exacerbates anxiety symptoms by reducing relevant positive thinking ac-

tivities or disparaging positive signals, thereby intensifying negative thoughts associated with anxiety symptoms. Beck (2013) described in his information processing model that dysfunctional individuals automatically filter out positive information inconsistent with their negative cognitive schemas or disparage these positive signals, thus reinforcing negative core beliefs. Similarly, socially anxious individuals with FPE use the same approach to disparage or deny positive experiences or signals in their environment to avoid high attention and expectations from others, temporarily reducing anxiety (Heimberg & Becker, 2002).

Specifically, DPSO exacerbates anxiety symptoms differently in self-directed and other-directed thinking. Self-directed DPSO reduces positive emotions. As previously discussed, FPE decreases positive emotions like pride (Reichenberger et al., 2015). Even when performing well, individuals do not internalize these positive feelings to avoid self or others' recognition. Additionally, by screening out positive signals, they reduce challenges to negative beliefs, reinforcing negative thinking and beliefs (Clark & Wells, 1995).

Other-directed DPSO leads to external attributions for positive outcomes. For example, when telling a joke that makes others laugh, the individual might attribute it to the other person's cooperation or low humor threshold. Through external attribution, they deflect positive evaluation and avoid the anxiety caused by FPE (Weeks, 2010; Weeks et al., 2008a). Over time, socially anxious individuals develop core beliefs such as "I am incompetent" or "I am not likable" (Norton & Abbott, 2016). Thoughts and interpretations consistent with these beliefs are incorporated into existing schemas, while positive thoughts and evaluations are disparaged or ignored (Beck, 2013). Therefore, in individuals with FPE, DPSO better avoids challenges from positive outcomes to their thinking and temporarily alleviates anxiety-related cognitions and emotions.

4.2.2 Interpretation Bias

Like FPE, the concept of interpretation bias initially emerged from anxiety research (Beck, 1976). Interpretation bias refers to the tendency to interpret ambiguous situations positively or negatively (Hirsch et al., 2016) and represents a key factor in the development and maintenance of social anxiety symptoms (Spence & Rapee, 2016). Based on when it occurs, interpretation bias is divided into online and offline interpretation bias (Zhang & Zhang, 2018). Research shows that socially anxious individuals exhibit a lack of positive interpretation in online interpretation bias, which is primarily related to their FPE (Hirsch et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2015).

Overall, interpretation bias exacerbates social anxiety symptoms in two ways. First, it causes biased interpretations of social situations, leading to negative interpretation bias (Figure 1, interpretation bias \rightarrow negative interpretation). Second, it triggers negative emotions and avoidance behaviors, creating a negative cognitive cycle (Heimberg et al., 2010; Norton & Abbott, 2016), thereby

maintaining and worsening anxiety symptoms (Figure 1, interpretation bias → avoidance behavior → negative emotion). Specifically:

First, interpretation bias increases negative interpretations. Yang et al. (2015) administered the Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale (FPE) and a positive evaluation interpretation assessment questionnaire, finding that highly socially anxious participants experienced more negative emotions when receiving positive evaluation and were more likely to interpret it negatively. For situations like “being praised by a teacher for answering a question in class” or “being complimented by classmates for being energetic,” socially anxious individuals responded with embarrassment or surprise. Thus, socially anxious individuals make negative interpretations due to FPE, and this bias may occur in positive or neutral situations (Amir et al., 2012; Romano et al., 2020; Li & Feng, 2013).

Second, interpretation bias affects not only cognitive bias but also behavior and emotion, creating a negative cognitive cycle. This cycle involves three aspects: interpretation bias and avoidance behavior, interpretation bias and negative emotion, and negative emotion and avoidance behavior. When socially anxious individuals generate more negative interpretations through interpretation bias (e.g., “the environment is threatening”), their fear of social situations intensifies, affecting their performance (Clark & Wells, 1995) and leading to more avoidance behaviors (Piccirillo et al., 2016). When they engage in avoidance behaviors, they lose opportunities to detect positive feedback from the environment, reinforcing their negative beliefs that the environment is threatening—thus behavior affects cognition.

Interpretation bias and negative emotion also influence each other. When socially anxious individuals develop negative expectations about situations through interpretation bias (e.g., others are threatening or attentive), they experience negative emotions such as fear and embarrassment (Gutierrez-Garcia & Calvo, 2017; Hirsch et al., 2016), showing how cognition affects emotion. According to mood-congruence theory, this negative emotional state leads individuals to retrieve more relevant negative experiences (e.g., past embarrassing events), further intensifying negative interpretations of situations (Deng et al., 2018)—thus emotion affects cognition.

Finally, emotion and behavior also interact. When individuals experience worry and fear due to FPE, they engage in avoidance or strategic failure behaviors to avoid attracting attention. These behaviors provide temporary “safety” (Knoll et al., 2019), alleviating fear and worry.

5 Research Outlook

The preceding discussion demonstrates that socially anxious individuals exhibit denial of positive cognition, avoidance of attention, and emotional negativization due to FPE, and that FPE exacerbates anxiety symptoms through mechanisms such as disqualification of positive social outcomes and interpretation bias. These findings enhance our understanding of social anxiety and provide new av-

enues for intervention. Therefore, integrating existing research with Chinese cultural characteristics, future studies could proceed in the following directions.

5.1 Emphasize Clinical Intervention Research on Fear of Positive Evaluation

The proposed mechanism suggests that interpretation bias plays an important role in maintaining social anxiety symptoms through FPE. Interpretation bias not only directly leads to negative interpretations but also triggers avoidance behaviors and negative emotions. Therefore, strengthening interventions for interpretation bias in socially anxious individuals is crucial for comprehensively alleviating their symptoms (Weeks & Howell, 2012a, 2014).

In recent years, cognitive bias modification for interpretation has been frequently used in social anxiety interventions (Li & Feng, 2013). This procedure trains clients to form positive evaluations of ambiguous social situations, thereby fostering positive interpretation bias (Fodor et al., 2020; Orchard et al., 2017). However, its effectiveness has been increasingly questioned, with many analyses showing minimal effects (Cristea et al., 2016; Liu & Li, 2018; Ren et al., 2016). Incorporating FPE research reveals a potential problem: this modification procedure unilaterally guides clients toward positive interpretations, which may trigger new anxiety symptoms—FPE. If exposure to positive evaluation is added to this procedure, might it more comprehensively address social anxiety symptoms? For instance, Britton and Bailey (2018) exposed participants to positive faces in attention bias training and found significantly reduced FPE levels. Many clinical studies have also found that targeted treatment of FPE improves clinical outcomes for social anxiety (Weeks & Howell, 2014; Weeks, 2015). Thus, while changing clients' fear of negative evaluation, increasing their exposure to positive evaluation situations may more effectively alleviate their anxiety symptoms. Future research should re-evaluate the effectiveness of interpretation bias modification procedures with added FPE interventions.

5.2 Explore Implications of Fear of Positive Evaluation for Education and Counseling

The characteristics of FPE suggest that socially anxious individuals deny positive cognition and avoid attention. How can we use these characteristics to guide educational and counseling work with socially anxious individuals?

First, in teaching, educators should avoid placing excessively high expectations on socially anxious students or publicly praising them. The Pygmalion effect suggests that high teacher expectations influence students to achieve expected outcomes (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968). Faced with high expectations, people typically identify with and strive toward them, maintaining a positive self-image consistent with others' views. However, is this true for socially anxious individuals? They fear positive evaluation precisely because it raises others' expectations while their perceived abilities remain stable (Heimberg et al., 2010). Therefore,

high expectations may actually increase their anxiety. Thus, setting high goals for socially anxious individuals may hinder rather than help their development.

Second, we must recognize that encouragement in therapy may cause client anxiety. In counseling, therapists typically encourage and praise clients' progress, but might this inadvertently expose them to FPE, causing discomfort or triggering anxiety symptoms? Weeks and Zoccola (2016) found that when socially anxious individuals receive positive feedback about their performance, their anxiety increases because they believe it raises expectations beyond their capabilities (Hirsch et al., 2016). Therefore, simple encouragement may not be beneficial for socially anxious clients. However, this does not mean encouragement is inappropriate. Rather, exposing clients to FPE may provide a therapeutic opportunity, but therapists should monitor clients' reactions, identify any avoidance or safety behaviors or discomfort they exhibit when facing FPE, and intervene appropriately rather than simply offering encouragement.

5.3 Strengthen Cross-Cultural Research on Fear of Positive Evaluation

Currently, domestic research on FPE remains limited, while foreign research has focused primarily on clinical populations, especially those with social anxiety. However, as the saying goes, "Chinese emphasize modesty, Westerners express themselves." In Chinese culture, which advocates humility, does FPE exist more broadly across populations and manifest new characteristics?

The traditional Chinese value of modesty is deeply rooted in cultural philosophy. The *I Ching* emphasizes "humility within the earth" and "self-restraint through modesty," while Daoism advocates "maintaining softness and weakness, yielding without contention" and "great skill appears clumsy." These cultural philosophies reflect a principle of social self-preservation that aligns with evolutionary psychology's explanation of FPE. Research on modesty has found that inducing modesty can reduce positive self-bias (Shi et al., 2017), suggesting a negative relationship between modesty and positive self-perception. Studies on death anxiety have found that modesty better buffers anxiety than self-affirmation (Kesebir, 2014), particularly in Eastern cultures that advocate modesty norms. Self-modesty helps individuals conform to social standards, gain acceptance, and alleviate existential anxiety (Du & Jonas, 2015). This parallels the function of FPE in avoiding social anxiety: socially anxious individuals use FPE to avoid competition and attention from group members, facilitating survival and reducing anxiety.

These studies suggest similarities between FPE and modesty. Therefore, under the influence of Chinese culture's emphasis on humility, might FPE exist more widely across groups or emerge in more diverse situations? This warrants further investigation. Additionally, Hu and Huang (2009) noted that modesty is a culturally distinctive quality without a fully equivalent concept in Western psychology. Therefore, 本土化 research on FPE within a self-modesty cultural

context may enrich our understanding of modesty and explore whether FPE exhibits cultural differences.

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