Social Impairment, Social Anxiety, and Loneliness
In High-Functioning Adolescents with ASD and Social Phobia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between generalized social anxiety, degree of social impairment, and loneliness in a sample of adolescents (n = 23; 7 females; ages 12-17) with High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HFASD) and comorbid Social Phobia (SoP). Adolescents with less clinician-rated social impairment tended to report more social anxiety, and those with more self-reported social anxiety tended to report more loneliness. Implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Social anxiety is a fairly common problem among adolescents with HFASD (Bellini, 2004; Knausko et al., 2008). Some research suggests that greater social skills deficits lead to increased anxiety due to experiences of rejection and social isolation (Tantam, 2000). There is evidence, however, that ASD severity is negatively correlated with parent-reported general anxiety problems in children with ASD (Mazurek & Kanne, 2010).

It is also possible that awareness of social difficulty, not actual degree of social disability, may be the impetus for the development of social anxiety (Hurtig et al., 2008). The relationship between social impairment, social anxiety, and loneliness has not yet been explored in individuals with HFASD and diagnosed comorbid SoP.

Self-reported loneliness may reflect cognitive awareness of one’s social impairments by portraying insight into the consequences of social rejection and isolation (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). The relationship between social impairment, social anxiety, and loneliness has not yet been explored in individuals with HFASD and diagnosed comorbid SoP.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between social anxiety, loneliness, and ASD-related social impairment in adolescents with HFASD and SoP. Specifically, we hypothesized that social anxiety would be positively correlated with self-reported feelings of loneliness.

METHODS

Participants

Data were collected from 23 adolescents (7 females; age 12-17) with diagnoses of Autistic Disorder, Asperger’s Disorder, or PDD-NOS, based on clinical interview, the ADOS, and the ADI-R, and comorbid Social Phobia from an ongoing experimental treatment study (White; K01MH079945).

All participants had a Verbal IQ ≥ 70 on the Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (WASI).

Nineteen participants (82.6%) had at least one additional anxiety diagnosis, with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (n = 15) and Specific Phobia (n = 10) as the most common.

Measures

- Anxiety Disorders Interview Schedule for Children/Parents (ADIS-C/P; Silverman & Albano, 1996). A semi-structured clinical interview with parent and child that assesses the major anxiety disorders experienced by youth.
- Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS; Lord, Rutter, DiLavore, & Risi, 1998). A semi-structured, observational assessment of ASD. In the current sample, 15 participants completed an ADOS-Module 3, and 8 participants completed an ADOS-Module 4.
- Loneliness Questionnaire (Bauminger, Shulman, & Agam, 2003). A self-report measure, used to assess loneliness in children with ASD, that distinguishes between emotional loneliness (i.e., feelings of isolation and lack of affective bonding) and social loneliness (i.e., the child’s perceived lack of social involvement with peers).
- Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (WASI; Wechsler, 1999). A reliable and valid brief measure of intelligence. Only two verbal subs tests (Vocabulary and Similarities) were administered to assess verbal IQ.

RESULTS

- Based on the MASC clinical cut-off score of 65, clinically elevated anxiety was endorsed by 10 participants on the Humiliation/Rejection subscale, 7 participants on the Performance Fears subscale, and 11 participants for Total Social Anxiety.
- Bivariate correlations among generalized (i.e., interaction-based) social anxiety, social impairment, loneliness, and verbal IQ were examined.
- A significant negative correlation was found between clinician-rated social impairment and youth-reported generalized social anxiety (r = -.416, p < .05).
- Youth-reported generalized social anxiety was significantly related to youth-reported emotional loneliness (r = .556, p < .01) and youth-reported social loneliness (r = .475, p < .05). Verbal IQ was also significantly related to youth-reported social loneliness (r = .427, p < .05).

CONCLUSIONS

- In this sample of adolescents with HFASD and SoP, adolescents with less social impairment, regardless of verbal IQ, tended to report more social anxiety, and those with more social anxiety tended to report more loneliness.
- These results are consistent with previous research showing that youth with ASD and elevated anxiety experience greater loneliness (White & Roberson-Nay, 2009), which may reflect a greater degree of insight into their ASD-related social difficulties. Also, participants with a higher verbal IQ tended to report more social loneliness, perhaps signifying a greater awareness of their social deficits.
- In contrast to our findings, other research has shown a positive relationship between social impairment and anxiety in adolescents with HFASD (Sukhodolsky et al., 2008). This relationship, however, was found for parent-reported impairment and broad anxiety (i.e., not only SoP) in youth (mean age = 8.2 years) without confirmed anxiety disorder diagnoses.

LIMITATIONS/FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- This study’s primary limitation is the small sample size. Also, no “gold standard” measure exists for assessing social anxiety in individuals with ASD, and the reliability and validity of self-report measures in this population have been questioned (Wood & Gadow, 2010).
- Future research with larger samples of adolescents with diagnosed HFASD and SoP are needed to support the finding that the inclusion of self-reports can provide unique information about the youth’s awareness of difficulties and willingness to report symptoms.

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Note: See handout for references.