

### **Mild to severe social fears: Ranking types of feared social situations using item response theory**

#### **What was the aim?**

Social anxiety disorder, a severe fear of being judged negatively by others, is one of the most common mental disorders in Australia. Its presence can lead to long term impairment, distress and vulnerability to the development of other problems such as depression and harmful alcohol consumption. The specific social situations people fear often vary, with some social fears more common than others. For example, fears of public speaking or public performance are frequently the most commonly reported in international mental health surveys. This has led to a distinction between performance- (e.g. public speaking) and interaction-based fears (e.g. starting a conversation with someone new). However, instead of being different types of social anxiety, these two categories may reflect different levels of social anxiety severity. This study used item response theory techniques, to explicitly test whether different types of social fears differ in underlying social anxiety severity.

#### **How did we do it?**

Different types of social fears (ie. social situations) contained in three different structured diagnostic interviews conducted in four different epidemiological surveys in the United States (n = 2261, n = 5411) and Australia (n = 1845, n = 1497) were ranked using 2-parameter logistic item response theory models.

#### **What did we find?**

The results showed that the level of fear that someone reports in a specific social activity does not necessarily predict whether they have a social anxiety disorder. Instead, the type of situations a person fears may provide a good indication of overall social anxiety severity. For example, someone with a fear of public speaking may rank this as causing severe anxiety; however, this fear is a very common social fear. In contrast, that same level of anxiety experienced in more routine situations (e.g. eating or drinking in public, being watched writing) is likely to indicate a severe and disabling social anxiety disorder. Types of fears which suggest a moderate range of social anxiety include sitting exams, being assertive or talking to people in authority.

#### **What does this mean in practice?**

Understanding differences in the underlying severity of different types of social fears has important implications for the underlying structure of social anxiety, and may also enhance the delivery of social anxiety treatment at a population level. For example, having an understanding of typical ordering of underlying severity can inform exposure protocols for developers of exposure therapy for self-directed treatments (e.g. online treatments) or can help non-clinical healthcare workers deliver interventions.

#### **Citation**

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